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End-Game
Why American Interventions Become Quagmires

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End-Game: Why American Interventions Become Quagmires

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Abstract

Why have the major post 9/11 U.S. military interventions turned into quagmires? Despite huge power imbalances, major capacity-building efforts, and repeated tactical victories, the wars in Afghanistan (2001-present) and Iraq (2003-2011; 2014-present) turned bloody and intractable. The inability to design and manage war termination is an important part of the explanation why successful military operations to overthrow two third-world regimes failed to achieve favorable and durable outcomes.

This thesis uses the abductive research method to develop three hypotheses to investigate these problems. Hypothesis #1: *The failure to consider war termination heightens the risk of selecting a myopic strategy that has a low probability of success.* Hypothesis #2: *Cognitive obstacles, political frictions, and patron-client problems can impede the ability to recognize and abandon an ineffective or losing strategy.* Hypothesis #3: *When the United States tires of the war and decides to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries can undermine the prospects of a favorable outcome.* These hypotheses are examined in the case studies and used to draw conclusions.

Three main findings emerge. First, the United States government has no organized way to consider war termination and thus selected strategies that overestimated the prospects of decisive military victory. Second, the United States was slow to recognize and modify or abandon losing strategies. In both cases, U.S. officials believed their strategies were working even as the situations deteriorated. Third, once the United States decided to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries and disconnects in strategy undermined the prospects for a successful transition or negotiated outcome.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Why have the major post 9/11 U.S. military interventions turned into quagmires, and what can we learn from these conflicts about war termination? Despite huge power imbalances, major capacity-building efforts, and repeated tactical victories, the wars in Afghanistan (2001-present) and Iraq (2003-2011; 2014-present) turned bloody and intractable. Former Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) chief General Stanley A. McChrystal, reflecting on his fight against al Qaeda in Iraq, observed that the world's most elite counterterrorist force struggled initially "against a seemingly ragtag band of radical fighters." Despite the massive advantages in technology, resources, education, and training, he recalls, "things were slipping away from us."¹ As of January 2017, the United States remains engaged in wars in both countries. The inability to succeed against substantially weaker opponents suggests that problems could exist in how the United States develops and executes strategies for interventions. This thesis will focus on an underappreciated aspect of such strategies: war termination. This was a major gap in strategies for both interventions and helps to explain why they devolved into quagmires. Chapter 2's brief examination of the Vietnam conflict suggests the problem may be systemic.

What is War Termination?

Historian Lawrence Freedman describes strategy as "the best word we have for expressing attempts to think about our actions in advance, in light of our goals and capacities."² The quality of a strategy may be revealed in how well an actor finishes the war, not simply in how well it is fought. "If war is simply a 'grammar' in which the logic of political purpose is expressed in

¹ McChrystal et al (2016), 6, 18.

² Freedman (2013), ix-x.

violent terms,” explains historian Bradford Lee, “then it is in war termination that the purpose finally achieves its ultimate definition or refinement in political demands.”³ The U.S. Department of Defense, however, has no definition or doctrine for this seemingly critical aspect of war. Scholars, tending to focus on conventional conflicts, discuss war termination as a phase of activity nestled between the end of organized hostilities and the beginning of peace.⁴ “*In the time between war and peace,*” writes historian Matthew Moten, “it is easy to lose sight of the objectives for which one embarked upon war in the first place, and to forfeit the grasp on accomplishments bought at great expense to the treasury and the lives and health of the nation’s soldiery” [emphasis added].⁵ This view of war termination as a sort of transition from the military to the diplomats seems too narrow. Bradford Lee notes that the United States “has failed again and again to translate military success ... into the most favorable and durable political results.”⁶ A strategy that stops at the military objectives would be short-sighted.

This thesis defines war termination as the end of America’s participation in organized hostilities. There are different methods by which the United States can do this. For interventions, these can include decisive victory, negotiated settlement, transition-withdrawal, and decisive loss. As a consideration for strategy and decision-making, an intended war termination outcome is how the United States seeks to achieve a favorable and durable result that meets policy aims at acceptable cost. A strategy designed to achieve a decisive victory, for instance, could look quite different than one that seeks a negotiated outcome. These will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Bradford Lee found that throughout the wars of the

³ Lee (2003), 255.

⁴ Rose (2010); Iklè (1991); Reiter (2009); Caplan (2012); Lee & Walling (2003); Stanley (2009a, 2009b); Moten (2011).

⁵ Moten (2011), xi [emphasis added].

⁶ Lee & Walling (2003), 245; See also Caplan (2012), 3-4.

twentieth century U.S. political and military leaders rarely, if ever, properly considered war termination.⁷ Lack of forethought about war termination can lead to decisions that undermine the ability to achieve a favorable and durable outcome. During the 1991 Gulf War Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin L. Powell waited until the Iraqi Army was in headlong retreat before discussing war termination. When he offered to bring a recommendation to President George H.W. Bush the next day, the latter responded, “If that is the case ... why not end it today?”⁸ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor discuss how this shortfall undermined America’s ability to capitalize on such a stunning battlefield victory.⁹ This lack of thinking through the end-game is part of the reason the United States, in political scientist Gideon Rose’s words, tends to “trip across the finish line.”¹⁰

Gaps in War Termination Scholarship for U.S. Interventions

The existing scholarship focuses mainly on the termination of conventional wars. The United States is consistently surprised by the complexity of end-game challenges, Gideon Rose argues, and often must improvise through uncertain and ambiguous strategic terrain.¹¹ Interventions in irregular wars may present very different challenges. The lack of attention to war termination in such conflicts creates three significant gaps in scholarship.

First, the conventional war paradigm may overestimate the military factors and underplay the political and diplomatic issues that tend to be more salient for wars against insurgencies. This

⁷ Lee and Walling (2003), 21.

⁸ Iklè (1991), ix; Powell (1995), 519, 521.

⁹ Gordon and Trainor (1995), xiv-xv, 463-478.

¹⁰ Rose (2010), 4.

¹¹ Rose (2010), 4.

could lead scholars to ignore implicit assumptions in intervention strategies that sow the seeds for war termination problems.¹² For instance, conventional wars tend to be fought between military forces until one side wins or a stalemate ensues. Because the clash between fielded forces is so central to success, political and military leaders work to “define a military objective that, if achieved, can deliver the political objective.”¹³ Once hostilities conclude, diplomats negotiate agreements that seek to maximize the advantage of battlefield results.

Interventions against insurgencies tend not to hinge upon the clash of opposing forces. There might not be a realistic military objective that could deliver the political aims. Ivan Arreguín-Toft, in fact, argues that stronger powers have been losing to weaker ones increasingly often since the nineteenth century.¹⁴ As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, insurgencies seek to avoid rather than bring about decisive battles. Several longitudinal studies show that the ability of the insurgency to sustain tangible support and of the government to win the battle of political legitimacy play more decisive roles in the war’s outcomes than battlefield engagements.¹⁵ Thus, intervention strategies that assume or fixate upon decisive military victory for war termination may have a low probability of success against insurgencies. This problem suggests hypothesis #1: *The failure to consider war termination heightens the risk of selecting a myopic strategy that has a low probability of success.*

A second major gap in the existing literature is that it does not help us understand why America has been slow to abandon losing or ineffective strategies. Realists such as Kenneth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer argue that a state at war will adopt strategies with the highest likelihood

¹² Toft (2005), 3-4, argues that asymmetries in direct versus indirect strategies account for a significant proportion of weak actor wins.

¹³ Lee & Walling (2003), 13.

¹⁴ Toft (2005), 3-5.

¹⁵ Paul, et al (2013); Martin C. Libicki (2008); Fearon and Laitin (2003).

of success and take advantage of conflict situations when the benefits outweigh the costs.¹⁶ If this is the case, then states should abandon a losing strategy quickly. As will be discussed in this thesis, the United States did not change strategies in Vietnam until 1969, in Iraq until 2007, and in Afghanistan until 2009 – five, four, and eight years into the conflicts, respectively.¹⁷ By each point the American public tired of the war and demanded withdrawal.

What accounts for the strategic paralysis? Scholars differ on the factors that may impede decisions about war termination. Elizabeth Stanley and Fred Iklè describe important political and bureaucratic obstacles that can affect decision-making.¹⁸ In examining cases from the U.S. Civil War to the Korean War, political scientist Dan Reiter asserts that domestic politics has been of “curious insignificance...in war-termination decision-making.”¹⁹ Stanley, however, marshals significant amounts of evidence that suggest a change in domestic coalitions was a key driver in bringing about an end to the Korean war.²⁰

Interventions against insurgencies may have important differences. The amount of ground taken or lost is normally a reasonable indicator of progress in conventional war. This is not necessarily the case for irregular war. Valid strategic metrics may be more difficult to develop, which could increase the risk of poor decision-making. The presence of bureaucratic silos may shape how progress is measured, and could lead to in-silo positive indicators even as the war

¹⁶ See Mearsheimer (2003); Waltz (1979, 2001).

¹⁷ As detailed in the conclusion the United States adopted the graduated response strategy to compel North Vietnam to cease its support for the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong).

¹⁸ Stanley and Sawyer (2009), 651-676; Fred Iklè identifies challenges associated with decisions whether to end the war, such as uncertain battlefield outcomes, poisonous “patriots versus traitors” domestic politics, and bureaucratic politics: Iklè (1991), xv, 2-6.

¹⁹ Reiter (2009), 6-7.

²⁰ Stanley (2009a), pp. 42-82. Stanley argues that changes in domestic coalitions are often required to end a war. Stanley (2009b), Goemans (2000a, 2000b), 15-22, suggests that regime-type is the most salient determinant of war termination behavior.

is going poorly overall. The interface between interagency silos that are forced to work together may leave important but undetected vulnerabilities. The nature of the host nation government likely plays a heightened role in counterinsurgency. Governments most likely to need assistance from an external power might also be the ones most vulnerable to insurgency, and more resistant to changes in strategy that require them to make reforms or compromises. The increasingly rich fields of decision theory, organizational management, behavioral economics, and agency theory may be of assistance in understanding potential causes of strategic paralysis.²¹ These potential challenges lead to hypothesis #2: *Cognitive obstacles, internal frictions, and patron-client problems can impede the ability to recognize and abandon an ineffective or losing strategy.* If present, such problems suggest important limitations to the realist perspective.

A third issue is that bargaining behavior could be very different for interventions against insurgencies. Conventional wars that settle into stalemates tend to produce symmetrical bargaining opportunities. Thomas Schelling suggests that “most conflict situations are essentially bargaining situations.”²² Historian Roger Spiller argues that combatants always “converge toward an agreement to stop fighting.”²³ This symmetry makes the fallback to negotiations possible. “Uncertainty causes war, combat provides information and reduces uncertainty,” Reiter argues, “and war ends when enough information has been provided.”²⁴ I. William Zartman refers to this as ripeness: a “mutually hurting stalemate” in which both actors

²¹ Kahneman (2003, 2013); Tversky and Kahneman (1986); Etner, Jeleva, and Tallon (2012), 234-270; Dan Ariely (2008); Harford (2008); Levitt and Dubner (2009); Laffont and Martimort (2002); Miller (2005), 203-25; Ladwig (2016), 99-146.

²² Schelling (1960), 5.

²³ Spiller (2011), 4

²⁴ Reiter (2009), 2-5, 16.

are in “an uncomfortable and costly predicament” which makes parties ripe for negotiation.²⁵ Thus, if decisive victory does not work out, combatants can fall back to negotiations.

Are those same opportunities present for intervening powers or could bargaining asymmetries affect the prospects of a favorable outcome? Once an intervening power decides the war is unwinnable and wants to withdraw, bargaining leverage may shift to the insurgency. This could reduce the likelihood of a favorable negotiated end to the conflict. Alternatively, the intervening power, as it withdraws, might seek to transition security responsibility to the host government as it builds their capacity. Capacity-building efforts, however, might create crippling dependencies that impede battlefield performance or give the host government false confidence that it can maintain the predatory and exclusionary practices which gave rise to the insurgency in the first place. These challenges suggest hypothesis #3: *When the United States tires of the war and decides to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries can undermine the prospects of a favorable outcome.*

Methodology and Sources

This thesis develops a new understanding of war termination challenges facing the United States during large scale interventions. The gaps in theory and scholarship noted above meant that an abductive research approach was likely to generate the richest insights. Abduction, as a research method, combines “deductively derived hypotheses” and “inductively derived insights.” It involves “moving back and forth between the two to produce an account that will be ‘verisimilar and believable to others looking over the same events’.”²⁶ Rather than

²⁵ Zartman (2001), 8.

²⁶ Finnemore (2003), 13; Ruggie (1998), 94; Pierce (1955).

proceeding linearly from theory to case research, this approach intertwines theory and empirical observation to enhance the understanding of both. This process expands and refines an evolving framework that yields unanticipated but related avenues requiring further investigation. The result is a pragmatic framework that enables theory to confront the real world and empirical observation to challenge theory.²⁷ For this thesis, the hypotheses are deduced from existing theories of war termination, strategy, decision-making, organizational behavior, agency, and negotiation, among others (discussed in Chapter 2), and are inductively derived from the two case studies of Iraq and Afghanistan. Taken together, these hypotheses help explain why America's post-9/11 interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan turned into quagmires after overthrowing two third-world regimes. As a check against these challenges being unique to a single U.S. administration or context, this thesis applies the three hypotheses to a short case study of Vietnam in Chapter 2.

This methodology is more appropriate than a primarily deductive approach for several reasons. First, existing war termination theory focuses mostly on state-on-state conventional war. New concepts are needed to understand the complexity of war termination challenges for intervening powers in irregular conflicts. Second, there is no appropriate null hypothesis. Since the United States emerged from the Second World War as a global power with a new national security architecture and powerful bureaucracies, it has not successfully prosecuted a large-scale military intervention against an insurgency. This thesis defines large-scale military intervention as one in which the United States deploys military forces of division-size or greater (over 10,000 soldiers) to play a leading role in ground combat operations. Only three conflicts qualify: Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. They have all become quagmires. Third, comparing American interventions with those of others is beyond the scope of this thesis and presents

²⁷ Dubois and Gadde (2002), 555; Haig (2005), 376-9.

different methodological challenges due to dissimilarities in doctrine, national security architecture and decision-making, to say nothing of domestic politics, strategic culture, and span of global responsibilities and interests. The extent to which these three hypotheses can be generalized beyond the cases in this thesis is an important subject for future research.

This thesis has benefitted from personal access to key decision-makers in both the Bush and Obama administrations. To examine the three hypotheses and draw conclusions, I have interviewed over thirty former senior officials who were instrumental in developing policy and strategy for Iraq and Afghanistan and were present for discussions in the White House Situation Room, in Baghdad, and/or in Kabul. Many of these former senior officials agreed to speak “on background” due to the sensitive nature of the issues.²⁸ The interviews are complemented by a significant number of published memoirs, which include those of a President, a National Security Advisor, three former Secretaries of Defense, and two theater-level commanders. This thesis has also made use of a wide range of United States government documents that are publicly available. Among these, congressionally-mandated Department of Defense semi-annual reports beginning in 2006 have provided exceptional detail on policy, strategy, operations, and assessments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reporting cables have offered insights into how officials viewed and interpreted issues at the time they occurred. These sources plus a wide array of journalist reporting and academic studies have helped to control for first person biases or incomplete recollections. My personal experience working at senior levels in Washington, D.C. and Kabul has helped me to ask the right questions and derive important insights. To guard against personal bias entering the thesis, I have relied on evidence from

²⁸ “On background” means the interviewee granted me permission to use the information but not to name them directly.

other sources in developing and defending the arguments and have noted the key efforts in which I was involved.

Main Findings

After applying the three hypotheses in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, three main findings emerge. First, the United States has no organized way to consider war termination and thus selected strategies for both conflicts that overestimated the prospects of decisive military victory. The government lacks an authoritative body of knowledge for how to integrate political, diplomatic, military, economic and other elements of national power to achieve a successful outcome against insurgencies. The United States has no doctrine or conceptual apparatus that enables it to differentiate war termination options and select ones with the highest probability of success. Decisive victory was implicitly assumed. Once the spectacular military campaigns overthrew the sitting governments, the United States government was at a loss for how to achieve a favorable and durable outcome. In both cases, the United States ignored or dismissed early opportunities to negotiate with defeated parties and unwittingly allowed predatory and exclusionary governments to form. The combination led to insurgencies that became sustainable. The stage was set for quagmire.

Second, the United States was slow to recognize and modify or abandon losing strategies. In both cases, U.S. officials believed their strategies were working even as the situations deteriorated. Confirmation bias was evident as officials emphasized positive indicators of progress and rationalized or, in some cases, even used negative indicators as evidence of success. Political frictions combined with confirmation bias and loss aversion led the Bush administration to dig in its heels on Iraq, and similar factors led the Obama administration to resist changes to drawdown timelines in both conflicts. The tendency in both administrations

to operate in bureaucratic silos reinforced the narrative of progress. Many in-silo milestones and indicators were positive. The problems were happening at the interface of the silos. Seams or gaps between them were ably exploited by the host governments and the insurgencies. Both the Iraqi and Afghan governments took advantage of these gaps to manipulate unwitting U.S. officials into advancing their predatory and exclusionary agendas. When silos interacted with one another fault lines could result in which efforts in one silo damaged progress in others. Civilian casualties from military operations, for instance, undermined the legitimacy of both governments and international missions. Patron-client problems diluted capacity-building efforts, created frictions between the U.S. and the host governments, and, in some cases, between Washington and American military and diplomats in Baghdad or Kabul. These toxic factors intensified the conflicts, reduced public support in both countries, and impeded U.S. decision-making. Although the United States made important strategic changes in both conflicts, it had paid penalties in public support along the way. The so-called crossover point, in which the host nation government could assume security lead and defeat the insurgency after the U.S. troop withdrawal, never occurred.

Third, once the United States decided to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries and disconnects in strategy undermined the prospects for a successful outcome. The weaker parties had more effective leverage. In Iraq, Bush was unable to gain Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's agreement for a "conditions-based" withdrawal and had to settle for a fixed timeline. The very limited amount of support Obama was willing to commit for an enduring presence led Maliki to calculate that the benefits were not worth the political cost. Just over two years after the last American troops withdrew, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) arose and humiliated the Iraqi Army that America had spent so much blood and treasure to build. In Afghanistan, efforts to bring about negotiations with the Taliban ended in disaster. Although the Taliban were willing to discuss the conditions of the U.S. withdrawal, they were uninterested in negotiating an end

to the conflict. They could play for time until international forces left. Deep problems in the U.S.-Afghan relationship led Afghan President Karzai to refuse to sign a bi-lateral security agreement to extend American troop presence beyond 2014. This was later signed by the incoming National Unity Government of President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, but not by one of these elected leaders. Obama's draw-down timeline, meanwhile, had to be modified because of larger than expected gains in territory by the Taliban and major problems within the Afghan National Security and Defense Forces.

Failure to consider war termination left the United States vulnerable to quagmire in both interventions. Preventing the formation of a sustainable insurgency and a predatory and exclusionary government should have been key elements in the strategies. The United States failed to seize or promote bargaining opportunities early, especially when both the defeated parties and local governments were highly uncertain about survival. Instead, the United States held on to an ineffective strategy and then doubled down. A more fulsome consideration of war termination might have led the United States to develop different strategies or to modify them more quickly and effectively. The American administrations might have concluded that transition strategies would be more likely to succeed by prioritizing government legitimacy over kinetic military operations. They might have also been more open to accepting three-quarters of the loaf in early bargains than suffering the risk of a bloody and intractable war that achieves far less at much greater cost. The brief discussion of the Vietnam war in Chapter 2 suggests that these findings are not unique to the post-9/11 era.

Personal Experiences with War Termination

This research project originates, in part, from my own frustration at the inability of the U.S. government to develop and execute a sensible approach to war termination in Afghanistan. As

a battalion task force commander in Kunar and Nuristan in 2007 and 2008, I engaged in what may have been the first successful local peace process in Afghanistan.²⁹ The effort resulted in the local branch of the insurgent group Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) to stop fighting and to eventually aligning with the Afghan government against the Taliban. This experience led to assignment as a senior advisor to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle A. Flournoy to support the Obama administration's development of a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan. I was soon directed to deploy back to Afghanistan as a senior advisor to General McChrystal and to lead his strategic assessment team. Months later, McChrystal asked me to advise him about war termination. "Reconciliation" was the term of art at that time.

For the next four years, I was intimately involved in U.S. efforts to bring the conflict to a successful conclusion. This included serving as the Secretary of Defense's representative in exploratory talks with the Taliban from 2011-2013. I have witnessed the challenges in getting the U.S. government's internal house in order regarding war termination and in coordinating such delicate issues with others. I saw how well-meaning but poorly coordinated efforts can be disastrous. I realized very quickly that, despite the obvious talent and experience of those engaged in the process, the U.S. government had no idea what it was doing. We had no useful doctrine, concepts, or body of knowledge for thinking through war termination and enacting a sensible strategy to achieve a realistic outcome. We faced huge cognitive barriers as well as political and bureaucratic resistance. We often wasted time negotiating with ourselves while alienating our Afghan government partners and leading the Taliban to conclude that we were operating in bad faith. None of this was due to malfeasance or lack of effort by U.S. officials.

I fully accept my own errors in this endeavor, which include, but are not restricted to, failing to frame issues with sufficient clarity to promote better policy decisions, and unintentionally

²⁹ Tapper (2012), 330-336.

upsetting my colleagues in Defense, State, and the White House when we talked past each other in debating issues and approaches. This dissertation has helped me to understand these failings even further. Throughout my personal experiences with war termination, I combed the existing literature to determine whether some useful models or analogies existed that could guide our decision-making and help us understand and navigate the challenges and resistance. What I found was very interesting, but ultimately disappointing. This thesis seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Thesis Roadmap

This thesis will develop an analytic framework for war termination that will be used to explore the three hypotheses (Chapter 2). The next six chapters will be devoted to the case studies. The examination will begin with Iraq, even though that intervention (2003) occurred after the one in Afghanistan (2001). This is because America withdrew earlier from there and the Iraq surge played a significant role in the Obama administration's decision-making for Afghanistan in 2009. Each case study will consist of three chapters, one exploring each hypothesis in turn. Each chapter begins with a brief overview of critical events before proceeding with the detailed analysis. The concluding chapter will outline the main findings, compare war termination challenges in the Iraq and Afghan conflicts, and close with implications for U.S. foreign policy and for scholarship.

Chapter 2: Why Interventions Become Quagmires

Why have major post-9/11 U.S. interventions become quagmires? It seems counterintuitive that the world's richest country with the most capable and technologically advanced military supported by highly educated diplomats and development professionals cannot defeat poorly educated, trained, and resourced insurgent groups. This has been the case, however, in Iraq and Afghanistan (and earlier in Vietnam). Some argue that counterinsurgency simply does not work and should be avoided.³⁰ Others suggest democracies are largely incapable of waging wars against insurgencies effectively.³¹ Leaving aside the merits of those arguments, the United States cannot always choose the wars it fights. In fact, the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan did not begin as counterinsurgencies. They developed into them as insurgencies fomented against the newly installed U.S.-backed governments. Understanding why the United States has been unable to win these conflicts quickly has the potential to advance the scholarship on war and strategy.

This thesis contends that America's inability to design and manage war termination is an important part of the reason for post-9/11 quagmires. Failure to adequately consider the last step in war before taking the first has produced observable problems in strategic decision-making that have heightened the risks of the conflict becoming intractable. Inattention to war termination has heightened the risk of selecting intervention strategies that have low probabilities of success. The flawed strategies can become entrenched due to cognitive obstacles, political frictions, and misalignment of interests and objectives with the host nation. As America grows exhausted with the war and wants to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries

³⁰ Eikenberry (2013); Gentile (2013); Bacevich (2005, 2008).

³¹ Jentleson (1992), 49–74; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005/06), 7–46; Feaver and Gelpi (2004); Gartner (2008), 95–106; For an alternative view see Lyall (2010), 167–92.

with the insurgency and host nation undermine the prospects of securing a favorable and durable outcome. To advance the argument, this thesis will develop three hypotheses by critically analyzing the available literature on war termination, strategy and doctrine, counterinsurgency, decision-making, organizational management, agency theory, and bargaining, among others.

Hypothesis #1: *The failure to consider war termination heightens the risk of selecting a myopic strategy that has a low probability of success.*

Hypothesis #2: *Cognitive obstacles, political frictions, and patron-client problems can impede the ability to recognize and abandon an ineffective or losing strategy.*

Hypothesis #3. *When the United States tires of the war and decides to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries can undermine the prospects of a favorable outcome.*

With this analytic framework in place, this thesis will examine the salience of these hypotheses using the major post-9/11 military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan as case studies. To avoid spurious correlation, this thesis is attentive to external factors that could explain sub-optimal or seemingly irrational decisions, and will briefly apply the hypotheses at the end of this chapter to the Vietnam conflict. At a minimum, this analysis can provide circumstantial evidence of how the inattention to war termination has increased the likelihood of U.S. interventions against insurgencies becoming intractable. The concluding chapter will compare the cases and discuss the implications for U.S. foreign policy and scholarship on war and strategy. Taken together, these three hypotheses provide a unique and compelling addition to understanding why post-9/11 interventions turned into quagmires.

Gaps in Theory and Doctrine

Modern militaries have produced copious doctrine to cover everything from operational art and forms of maneuver to squad tactics and even the construction of field expedient latrines.³² If a military commander wants to attack, he or she can find several offensive operations to consider, including hasty attack, deliberate attack, movement to contact, exploitation, pursuit, envelopment, double envelopment, penetration, airborne assault, and so forth. Commanders needing to defend will find an equally impressive array of options. The commander can select the best one based on a variety of considerations such as the correlation of forces and capabilities, terrain and weather, and mission and objectives. The statesman is not so lucky.

The Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz tells us not take the first step in war before considering the last.³³ Yet no doctrine or conceptual apparatus exists for war termination. The United States government has no authoritative body of expert knowledge on how to integrate diplomatic, military, political, economic, and other elements of national power to bring a war to a successful conclusion. Military warfighting doctrine is understandably focused on defeating the enemy's forces. The *Joint Operations* manual states that the general goal of military operations "is to prevail against the enemy as quickly as possible, conclude hostilities, and establish conditions favorable to the HN [host nation], the United States, and its multinational partners."³⁴ The United States Army calls "decisive action" – defeating enemy ground forces – a core competency.³⁵ When it comes to war termination, the Department of Defense manual covering doctrinal terms is nearly silent. The lone entry is a definition of war termination criteria: "the specified standards approved by the President and/or the Secretary of

³² See U.S. Department of Defense's Joint Electronic Library at http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jointpub.htm and the U.S. Army's list of field manuals at <http://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/fms.html>.

³³ Clausewitz (1984), 584.

³⁴ JP 3-0 (2011), xix

³⁵ ADP 3-0 (2011), 5-6.

Defense that must be met before a joint operation can be concluded.”³⁶ When the enemy is defeated, the military must turn to the Department of Defense’s *Law of War* manual for guidance on cease-fires, armistice, and enemy capitulation.³⁷ With no doctrine or taxonomy that differentiates war termination outcomes, the default for U.S interventions is probably decisive victory.

While highly desirable, decisive victory is not the only possible outcome. In some cases, it might not be realistic or cost effective. Clausewitz, for instance, proposes that “it is possible to increase the likelihood of success without defeating the enemy’s forces ... many roads lead to success [and] they do not all involve the opponent’s outright defeat.”³⁸ This suggests that a combatant has multiple options to achieve a favorable and durable outcome, and that decisive victory is not necessarily the best one in certain circumstances. What alternatives exist? Clausewitz does not offer a taxonomy of war termination methods, either, so it is necessary to develop one. In very broad terms, war termination outcomes for interventions against insurgencies can include:

- **Decisive victory**, in which the insurgency capitulates or ceases to exist.
- **Negotiated settlement** or mixed outcome, in which neither side wins outright. Parties compromise to end the war and settle remaining differences through peaceful politics.
- **Transition and withdrawal**, in which the intervening power degrades the insurgency while building the capacity of the host nation government and security forces. As these forces become superior to the enemy (the crossover point), the intervening power hands

³⁶ JP 1-02 (2016), 246

³⁷ Law of War Manual (May 2016), 813-850.

³⁸ Clausewitz (1984), 92, 95, 99.

over security responsibility to the host nation and withdraws without concluding a peace agreement.

- **Decisive loss**, in which the intervening power agrees to withdraw after battlefield defeats.³⁹

If Clausewitz is correct that a combatant can increase the likelihood of success without defeating the enemy's forces, then the choice of war termination method ought to be important. This choice should occur during the development of strategy or in its modification as circumstances warrant. As discussed in the Introduction, an intended war termination outcome (or method) is how a combatant seeks to achieve a favorable and durable result that meets policy aims at acceptable cost. A strategy designed to achieve decisive victory over an insurgency, for instance, could be substantively different than one that seeks a negotiated settlement or transition. If the likely cost of decisive victory is too high, an alternative method that achieves the war aims would be appropriate.

Furthermore, Clausewitz's statement implies that it is possible in certain conflicts for some war termination methods to have a higher probability of success than others. Making the right choice (or avoiding a bad one) thus seems to be important. Aiming for an unrealistic outcome could prolong a war and its costs. Aiming for an insufficient outcome could undermine the achievement of policy aims. Circumstances, of course, may change during a conflict. Knowing when to adopt an alternative war termination method seems to be a critical decision, too. For instance, a combatant could aim for decisive victory and then fall back, if necessary, to negotiations. Alternatively, an intervening power that seeks a favorable and durable outcome through transition could meet with unexpected success that opens an opportunity for a decisive

³⁹ An intervening power could also make an open-ended commitment to the host country and continue fighting the war indefinitely. The intervening power's participation in the war will end at some point in one of these four ways.

victory. U.S. civilian and military leaders, however, have not had this taxonomy or an authoritative language to discuss these choices. This gap in theory and practice could potentially lead to strategies that implicitly assume decisive victory, even if that is a low probability outcome, and to miscommunication and misunderstanding between policy makers in Washington and commanders and diplomats in the field.

Decisive Victory Strategies Can Heighten the Risk of Quagmires

Can a strategy that aims for or implicitly assumes decisive victory place an intervening power at higher risk of quagmire? Clausewitz's statement above suggests this is possible. The presumption of decisive victory affects rational strategic decision-making.⁴⁰ Michael Handel observes that strategy ought to be a rational process, evidenced by identifying political goals, analyzing the character of the conflict, developing a strategy to achieve stated aims, and then making peace when the goals have been attained or when the costs and risks have come to outweigh the value of the political object.⁴¹ The process is intentional – the calculated and purposeful use of force to achieve desired political outcomes.

This is not to imply that statesmen are perfectly rational or that they do not make bad decisions. Behavioral scientist Daniel Kahneman defines rationality as “logical coherence – reasonable or not.” This is a high standard, and, as Kahnmen admits, “impossibly restrictive.”⁴² That wars can escape rational direction is a central point of Clausewitz's theory of war.⁴³ Military or other

⁴⁰ Clausewitz (1984), 75, 80-81, 87. “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose” (87).

⁴¹ Lee & Walling (2003), 2-3. See also Handel (2001), 19-32; Clausewitz (1984), 81; Sun Tzu (1980), 77-79.

⁴² Kahneman (2013), 411-2.

⁴³ Clausewitz (1984), 89.

considerations can dominate political purposes. Passions, fears, personal and bureaucratic interests, entrapment, biases, among other challenges, can affect decision-making and undermine rational choice.⁴⁴ Factors such as these lead theorists Braford Lee and Karl Walling to argue that it is the responsibility of the state leadership to make strategy “as rational an instrument of policy as the circumstances of a particular war admit.”⁴⁵

Are Some Conflicts Less Prone to Decisive Victory?

If the first step to making war a rational instrument is to determine the political goals, the second is to understand the character of the conflict.⁴⁶ This includes estimating the goals of the different belligerents; evaluating the importance of those goals to them (the “value of the object” for Clausewitz⁴⁷); assessing the strengths and weaknesses, capabilities and limitations of each actor; calculating comparative advantages; and weighing potential risks and opportunities.⁴⁸ This process, political scientist Richard K. Betts argues, has a high risk of error as policy-makers struggle to use intelligence reports and assessments that can be vague, incomplete, misleading, or contradictory to make strategic decisions.⁴⁹ At the same time, he

⁴⁴ For more on factors affecting rational decision-making, see Clausewitz (1984), 84, 117-8; Kahneman and Tversky (1972), 430-451; Kahneman, Slovik, and Tversky (1987); Allison (1969), 689-718; Allison and Zelikow (1999). For a critique of Allison and Zelikow see Bendor and Hammond 1992), 301-322.

⁴⁵ Lee & Walling (2003), 3.

⁴⁶ Clausewitz (1984), 88; Sun-Tzu (1980), 63-71, 96-101; JP-5-0 (2011); ADP 5-0 (May 2012).

⁴⁷ Clausewitz (1984), 80-81.

⁴⁸ JP 5-0 (2011); ADP 5-0 (May 2012).

⁴⁹ Betts (1978) 61-8; Betts (2004); Flynn, Pottinger, and Batchelor (2010).

notes, policy-makers can ignore, discount, or misinterpret accurate intelligence.⁵⁰ Intelligence producers and consumers are imperfect.

Complexity and interaction contribute to war's unpredictability. Both Sun-Tzu and Clausewitz, arguably the two most durably influential thinkers on war, acknowledged war's unpredictability.⁵¹ As a strategist for hire, Sun Tzu focused on the importance of intelligence, wisdom, and skill in managing uncertainty and exploiting it for advantage.⁵² Clausewitz, on the other hand, was more focused on the nature of war itself as an unpredictable phenomenon due to inherent factors such as fog, friction, interaction, chance, and probability.⁵³ Handel argues that after the centrality of politics in war, uncertainty was Clausewitz's second most important group of ideas. Handel noted that "while the majority of those writing on the subject of war seek clarity and positive guidance for action, Clausewitz concluded that the best way to succeed in war was through comprehension of its uncertain nature."⁵⁴ Clausewitz describes war as a duel, as countless duels, as wrestling, and as a collision of living forces operating with strength of will: "Once again, there is interaction he dictates to me as much as I dictate to him."⁵⁵ Clausewitz's ideas would be later linked to theories chaos, complexity, and

⁵⁰ Betts (2004).

⁵¹ Sun Tzu (1980); Clausewitz (1984).

⁵² Handel (2001), 236. Kolenda (2002), 14-18.

⁵³ See Clausewitz (1984). Fog (117-8): deals with the inability to fully understand what is occurring; friction (119-121) explains why even the simplest actions in war can be so difficult; interaction (75, 85, 87-9) by opposing forces creates unpredictable outcomes. For an in-depth discussion of Clausewitz's view of uncertainty see Kolenda (2002), 18-45.

⁵⁴ Handel (1986), 7.

⁵⁵ Clausewitz (1984), 75-77.

nonlinearity to show how outcomes in human endeavors can be deterministic but unpredictable.⁵⁶

Clausewitz stressed the unpredictability of Napoleonic-era wars and the inability to reduce them to fixed rules and formulas.⁵⁷ Insurgencies can be even more problematic. A huge imbalance in the correlation of military forces could lead an intervening power to place excessive faith in military force to achieve decisive victory. Insurgencies recognize the imbalances and seek to minimize opponent strengths while exploiting inherent vulnerabilities. Thus, insurgent forces tend to wage wars of exhaustion that avoid decisive battles, focus on population control and support, and use violence to wear down stronger opponents while communicating their own relevance and staying power.⁵⁸ Interactions are occurring not solely between military forces but within and among the potentially more decisive political, diplomatic, and economic dimensions of the conflict.⁵⁹ The mixed record of counterinsurgencies, even those with external support from sophisticated western powers, suggest that strategies based primarily upon military factors can be highly problematic.⁶⁰

Empirical analysis of similar conflicts could reduce the risk of decision-making errors, or at least uncover persistent challenges and probabilities. Fortunately, some good statistical work is now available. For interventions against an insurgency, two questions are consistently critical: is the insurgency sustainable and is the host nation government able to win the battle

⁵⁶ Beyerchen, (1992) 59-90; for more on Chaos, Complexity, and Nonlinearity see Lorenz (2001); Gleick (2008); Waldrop (1992); Johnson (2001); Beaumont (1994); Cimbala (2001); Mann (1992); and Stewart (1989).

⁵⁷ Clausewitz (1984), 134-139.

⁵⁸ Mao (1961); Taber (2002); O'Neill (2005); Betz (2008, 2015).

⁵⁹ Kilcullen (2010); Galula (2006); Kolenda (2012); Marston and Malkasian (2010).

⁶⁰ It is important to note that this paper does not seek to address the extent to which these problems affect democracies more than autocracies. In his analysis of 286 insurgencies from 1800-2005, Jason Lyall (2010), 1688, argues that, "democracy appears to exert almost no causal effect on either war outcomes or duration."

of legitimacy? In their analysis of 71 insurgencies since 1944, RAND scholars Chris Paul *et al* examine cases for common themes, approaches, and practices that lead toward success for the counterinsurgent. They classify 42 as insurgent wins (a 59% success rate), and tally 29 for the counterinsurgent (a 41% success rate).⁶¹ Their study led them to examine the salience of 24 counterinsurgency approaches, and then to arrive at a scorecard of 15 good and 11 bad practices.⁶² That analysis oriented mostly on tactics, but their data can be valuable at the strategic level. Their Qualitative Comparative Analysis reveals that two factors are salient. Each counterinsurgent win required both tangible support reduction of the insurgency and sufficient host nation commitment and motivation to winning the battle of legitimacy. Absence of one factor or the other consistently led to a counterinsurgent loss.⁶³

Tangible support is the ability of the insurgency to recruit manpower, obtain materiel, sustain financing, gather critical intelligence, and have access to sanctuary.⁶⁴ The ability of the insurgents to sustain tangible support almost perfectly correlates to the outcome. If the counterinsurgents failed to significantly reduce tangible support, the result was a loss in every case. In only two cases did the counterinsurgent disrupt tangible support and still lose.⁶⁵ It is

⁶¹ Paul (2013), 18. Others using statistical analysis include Libicki (2008), 373–396. Libicki’s 89 insurgencies reach back to 1934 and include ongoing ones. He classifies 28 as government wins, 25 cases as government defeat, 20 mixed outcomes, and 16 ongoing. Paul added four cases that appeared to meet Libicki’s criteria for inclusion, eliminated 17 that were ongoing or unresolved, cut out insurgencies prior to WWII, as well as four others that Paul *et al* considered were not insurgencies. Libicki’s original list was drawn from Fearon & Laitin (2003). A key difference in the assessment of wins and losses is that Paul assigns a winner to the mixed outcome, depending on which side appeared to get the better outcome. For Paul’s assessment criteria see Paul *et al* (2013), 16-20. I will rely primarily upon Paul’s study because it focuses on concluded insurgencies where outcomes can be assessed and correlations drawn more precisely. The specificity of Paul’s analytic categories is more useful for the purposes of this study.

⁶² Paul (2013), xxi – xxvii. Paul’s 71 cases include 12 that he argues are unfit for comparative purposes because the governments in question were “fighting against the tide of history” (end of colonialism, end of apartheid, etc.). He uses these 59 in determining the 15 good practices and 11 bad practices.

⁶³ Paul (2013), 149.

⁶⁴ Paul (2013), xxiii-xxiv.

⁶⁵ Paul (2013), 130-132.

important to note that tangible support is not necessarily the same as popular support. A counterinsurgent can have the support of the majority, but still not win if the insurgency sustains enough tangible support to materially threaten the government.⁶⁶ These findings are reinforced in Jason Lyall's analysis of 286 insurgencies: material support was one of the top three determinants in the war's length and outcome.⁶⁷ These empirical studies show that an insurgency with sustainable tangible support consistently wins.

A second key factor that emerges is the commitment and motivation of the host nation to win the battle of legitimacy. A key test for this is whether the government can win over insurgent controlled and contested areas. Loss occurred in all 17 cases in which such commitment and motivation were lacking.⁶⁸ In these cases perverse practices such as maximizing personal wealth and power at the expense of the state and citizenry, protecting unfair divisions of power and support, extending the conflict to bilk external supporters, or avoiding combat demonstrated failure of resolve.⁶⁹ In other words, exclusionary governments that alienate significant portions of the population tend to feed into the tangible support of the insurgency. This makes them unable to regain and retain control of contested and insurgent controlled areas. Unless the government can do so, a decisive victory is unlikely.

⁶⁶ Paul (2013), xxii; xxiv.

⁶⁷ Lyall (2010), 188-9. The other two are the status of the external power as an occupier and its degree of mechanization (i.e. is the counterinsurgent comfortable in operating among the people or more tied to machines). He observes that democracies "do struggle to defeat insurgencies – but not because they are democracies." Libicki's statistics also show significant correlation between outside support and insurgent success; Libicki (2008), 387-8.

⁶⁸ Paul (2013), xxiv. In cases where an external force demonstrated resolve but the host nation government and forces failed to do so, the result was a loss. Libicki (2008) also notes the strong outcome correlations with government popularity and competence, 388-391.

⁶⁹ Paul (2013), 129.

This is true even when an external actor intervenes to back the host nation. 28 cases involved support to the host nation government from an external actor. Externally supported counterinsurgents won no more often than wholly indigenous counterinsurgents.⁷⁰ No intervention prevailed if the host nation government was insufficiently committed to winning the battle of legitimacy.⁷¹ Unfortunately, governments that become predatory are not uncommon. As Akbar Ahmed, Paul Collier, and Sarah Chayes and others note, sectarian, ethno-centric, and kleptocratic regimes are at heightened risk of conflict and rebellion.⁷² Political scientist Stephen Biddle shows the near-perfect correlation between a state's score on the Transparency International corruption index and its rank on the list of U.S. security force assistance recipients.⁷³ External intervention can help a government that is on the right track succeed more quickly, but has a poor track record in rescuing a deeply compromised client.

Can a predatory regime simply wipe out the insurgency? Although complete repression might be possible in theory, it is often impractical. Attempts to do so can be counterproductive. Political scientist Stathis Kalyvas' analysis of 45 cases determined that a state's use of indiscriminate violence consistently provoked greater insurgent violence.⁷⁴ Paul's data also suggests strong evidence against repression for success in counterinsurgency.⁷⁵ Alexander Downes cites the Boer War 1899-1902 as an example in which indiscriminate violence was successful against a small, geographically isolated insurgent group.⁷⁶ The advent of 24-hour

⁷⁰ Paul (2013), xxix. Libicki (2008), 391-2.

⁷¹ Paul (2013), xxix

⁷² Ahmed (2013); Collier (2007), 17-52 and (2009), 15-74; Chayes (2015).

⁷³ Biddle, Macdonald and Baker (2016), 6-13.

⁷⁴ Kalyvas (2006).

⁷⁵ Paul (2013), 107-109.

⁷⁶ Downes (2008), 10, 156-177.

media and ubiquitous digital communications means that atrocities are highly likely to become public quickly. Mass atrocities could result in highly adverse consequences to the perpetrating government. Unless the insurgency fits very specific criteria, the prospects of widespread repression being successful seem remote.

Two critical factors, therefore, appear to be salient as an external power considers intervention to support a host government fighting an insurgency: is the insurgency sustainable and is the host government unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and insurgent controlled areas? The 2 x 2 table below illustrates the likely outcomes against those factors. If both answers are no, then the probability of an intervention achieving decisive victory is highly unlikely unless both factors are reversed.

		Decisive Victory Prospects	
		Host Government Unable to Win Battle of Legitimacy?	
		Yes	No
Insurgency Sustainable?	Yes	Decisive Victory highly unlikely	Decisive Victory doubtful (unless INS support disrupted)
	No	Decisive Victory doubtful (unless host gov't reforms)	Decisive Victory possible

Figure 1: Critical Factors Framework

On the other hand, if the insurgency is not sustainable (i.e. tangible support is effectively disrupted or non-existent) and the government can take and retain contested and insurgent controlled areas, the chances for a decisive victory improve significantly. External support

could speed the government's victory. In 26 of 28 wins, the host nation government usually met the critical test of commitment and motivation in the early phases of the conflict.⁷⁷ A mixed answer makes the decision more difficult. To have a chance for a clear win, the intervention must change the unfavorable variable. The insurgent's tangible support was sufficiently disrupted in Sierra Leone (1991-2002), Uganda (1986-2000), and Turkey against the PKK (1984-1999).⁷⁸ The governments of Senegal (1982-2002), Peru (1980-1992), and Angola (1975-2002) made enough reforms to succeed.⁷⁹ That external support or intervention does not guarantee success is seen in the cases of Vietnam (1960-1975), Afghanistan (1978-1992; 2001-2016), Liberia (1989-1997), Rwanda (1990-1994), and Iraq (2003-2016).⁸⁰

Decisive victory is not the only potential result. Insurgencies can end in a negotiated settlement or "mixed" outcome in which neither side wins decisively but one does relatively better in attaining its aims than the other. Of the 71 cases analyzed by Paul and his colleagues, nineteen of them were mixed outcomes. Thirteen of the nineteen were scored for the insurgents.⁸¹ A host nation government loss does not necessarily mean it is overthrown, but that it gives more major concessions to the insurgency than it gains. The data suggests that insurgencies which become sustainable are likely to do well in negotiations. An intervening power that fails to

⁷⁷ Paul (2013), 156.

⁷⁸ Paul, Clarke, and Grill (2010), 158-167 (Sierra Leone), 108-116 (Uganda), 87-97 (Turkey against PKK); Paul et al (2013), 54-55, 58. For further reading on the Turkey case see Marcus (2007); Mango (2006). For Uganda, see Nantulya (2001); Ofcansky (1999); For Sierra Leone: Montague (2002); Gberie (2005); Richards (1996); Olonisakin (2008); Richards (2014).

⁷⁹ Paul, Clark and Grill (2010), 77-86 (Senegal); 57-66 (Peru); Paul et al (2013), 363-373 (Angola). For Senegal: Manley (1998); Beck et al (2001); Englebert (2005). For Peru: Mauceri (1997). For Angola: Andresen (1998); Malaquias (2010); Vines and Oruitemeka (2009).

⁸⁰ Paul, Clarke and Grill (2010), 11-24 (Afghanistan 1978-1992), 126-135 (Liberia), 136-146 (Rwanda) Paul et al (2013), 177-197 (Vietnam). For Iraq see Gordon and Trainor (2012).

⁸¹ Paul et al (2013), 18-20; Libicki (2008) shows 20 mixed outcomes of 73 concluded cases but does not assign a winner for the mixed outcomes. For Paul's scoring methodology, see Paul et al (2013), 16-20.

achieve a decisive victory could theoretically modify its strategy to seek a negotiated outcome, but probably will need to accept significant compromises that the host nation government might oppose. Conversely, a strategy that seeks a negotiated outcome but rejects any concessions might be acceptable with the host nation but is likely to be rejected by the insurgency. Theoretically, a host nation loss in a negotiated settlement could still be a win for an intervening power. An external power may intervene to protect its own interests, not simply to ensure its client does not lose. Provided those aims are achieved in the outcome, the intervening power succeeds.

An intervening power could also transition security responsibility for an ongoing conflict to the host nation and withdraw. This is premised on what some call the “crossover” point: as the foreign counterinsurgent degrades the insurgency and builds the capacity of the host nation security forces, the latter will become capable of defeating the insurgency. Reaching this point allows the foreign force to withdraw knowing that the host nation partner can succeed largely on its own. Paul *et al* identify six cases in which an intervening power adopted the transition method. The government won only twice.⁸² This is too small a sample size to draw inference, as the authors note, but it is possible to make some conclusions from the larger data. The importance of the host nation government’s ability to win the battle of legitimacy suggests that a transition strategy should probably place a higher priority on factors that improve or prevent damage to legitimacy than on fighting the insurgency. Otherwise, the theoretical cross-over point might never occur. As discussed in more detail below, a strategy that begins seeking a decisive victory but changes to transition may require the intervening force to make a major shift in strategic and operational priorities.

⁸² Paul et al (2013), 177-8.

Although every conflict is unique, the two factors in the table above have been salient over time. This makes them critical elements in the character of the conflict and in weighing the prospects for decisive victory. Policy makers and strategists should have compelling reasons for believing the two can be favorable before selecting that war termination outcome. Otherwise, aiming for a different outcome or declining intervention altogether are probably the better choices. For interventions that seek to replace an existing regime with a new, friendlier one, the intervening power needs to ensure that the two negative factors do not materialize in the aftermath. If they do, the likelihood of decisive victory is low. While weighing the likelihood of success, the external power should also consider the element of time. The average (mean) duration of the 71 insurgencies since 1944 was 128 months (10.7 years), while the median duration was 118 months or 9.8 years. Counterinsurgent wins tend to take longer than losses (132 months versus 72 months).⁸³ The potential costs in blood, treasure, and time should factor in strategic decision-making.

Managing Risk and Uncertainty – Why External Support might not be the Game Changer

To further complicate matters, external powers may be limited in their ability to maximize the prospects for decisive victory. In fact, they can make decisions that curtail the likelihood of such an outcome. This statement seems counterintuitive – shouldn't states make decisions in wartime that maximize the chances for success? If the stakes are high enough, such as a fight for national existence, leaders are more likely to make decisions that maximize chances for success. If the stakes are much lower, leaders tend to make decisions that maximize the value of higher priorities.

⁸³ Paul et al (2013), 158-9.

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have been among the world's most prominent scholars on decision-making in risk and uncertainty. In their research, Kahneman and Tversky noticed a consistent set of biases that tend to lead decision-makers astray when managing risk and uncertainty. Risk deals with decisions in which the probabilities associated with possible outcomes are known. In uncertainty, such probabilities are not known.⁸⁴ Kahnemen and Tversky took issue with the standard rational model of economics in which people take risks when odds are favorable and avoid risk when they are not. They discovered that problems such as cognitive bias, availability heuristics, and intuitive decision-making consistently lead to decisions that select lower-probability outcomes or fail to achieve value-maximization.⁸⁵ The individual tests they perform can be criticized for involving math more complicated than most individuals perform on a daily basis, basing conclusions on answers involving trivial sums of money, and observing decisions made in isolation.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, the aggregate results reveal that decisions can violate the rational economic assumption of value maximization.⁸⁷

The tendency for plans and forecasts to be unrealistically close to best-case scenarios are what Kahneman and Tversky call the *planning fallacy*. Kahneman notes that executives too easily fall victim to this problem, overestimating benefits and underestimating costs. Thus, they take

⁸⁴ Tversky and Fox (1995), 269.

⁸⁵ Cognitive bias refers to systemic errors in thinking people use when interpreting information. Availability heuristics are mental shortcuts that rely on recent examples which people use to understand a subject. For instance, a recent airline crash might cause someone to prefer to drive than fly, even though flying is safer. Intuitive decision-making emphasizes the use of emotion or "gut-feel" or other subjective factors over objective analysis. Kahneman (2013), 252; Tversky and Kahneman (1974), 1124-1131; Kahneman and Tversky (1982), 143-157; (1992), 297-323.

⁸⁶ For instance, "Imagine that you face the following pair of concurrent decisions. First examine both decisions, then make your choices. Decision (i) Choose between A: sure gain of \$240; B: 25% chance to gain \$1,000 and 75% chance to gain nothing; Decision (ii): Choose between C: sure loss of \$750; D: 75% chance to lose \$1,000 and 25% chance to lose nothing." (The best combination is B and C, but most (73%) choose A and D). Kahneman (2013), 334-5.

⁸⁷ In fact, the entire discipline of behavioral economics grew out of the persistence of such human decision-making. See, for instance, Levitt & Dubner (2009, 2011); Ariely (2008 and 2010); Harford (2006, 2008).

on risky projects because they are overly optimistic about the odds of success.⁸⁸ Their decisions could be improved by consulting the statistics of similar cases.⁸⁹ To be sure, war is unpredictable and prospects for success can defy precise modeling and probabilities.⁹⁰ But knowledge of such probabilities can be useful in checking for overly optimistic assumptions and forecasts that can lead to exceedingly ambitious goals. If a power intends to intervene on behalf of a sectarian government to achieve a quick, decisive victory against a sustainable insurgency, for instance, the historically low probability of success should force policy makers and strategists to explain why they believe this situation is sufficiently different. Failure to critically examine these assumptions and forecasts can result in misplaced expectations about achieving decisive victory.

External powers may also face the problem of competing risks. Interventions do not occur in isolation of world events and other national interests. When interests clash, external powers generally prioritize the more important ones. This can be to the detriment of ongoing war efforts. This risk calculus helps to explain why the Soviet Union did not invade Western Europe or start a nuclear war with the United States over tangible support to Afghan insurgents in the 1980s. Likewise, the United States did not invade Iran over their support to Shi'a militants in Iraq and has not conducted a ground invasion of Pakistan to eliminate Taliban sanctuary. Such actions could have increased the costs of supporting an insurgency. But their consequences to broader national security interests were far too high. The *planning fallacy* heightens the risk of intervention strategies based on rosy forecasts. Thoughtful management of risk and uncertainty

⁸⁸ Kahneman (2013), 253. Slantchev and Tarar (2011), 135-148.

⁸⁹ Kahneman (2013), 250-252.

⁹⁰ Clausewitz (1984), 75-123; Handel (2001), xxiii, 26-32; Beyerchen (1992), 59-90.

by the intervening power across an array of national security concerns may result in choices that reduce the prospects of decisive victory even further.

The analysis above suggests that interventions against insurgencies that are based on the presumption of decisive victory could have low probabilities of success, and are likely to force the intervening power to seek alternative war termination outcomes. This leads to hypothesis #1: *The failure to consider war termination heightens the risk of selecting a myopic strategy that has a low probability of success.*

Cognitive Obstacles, Political Frictions, and Patron-Client Problems May Entrench Strategies

Intervening powers may implicitly assume that a fallback to negotiations or transition will be available if decisive victory is unattainable or infeasible. As discussed in the Introduction, the realist perspective suggests that decision-makers should immediately change strategies that are not working. Once enacted, however, strategies could become entrenched. This can result from three interrelated problems. Cognitive obstacles may lead decision-makers to believe the strategy is not failing or to assess that staying the course is preferable to the available alternatives. Second, decision-makers can face internal political and bureaucratic frictions that impair decision-making. Finally, patron-client problems with the host nation government can entrap an intervening power and undermine capacity-building efforts.

Cognitive Obstacles Tend to Reinforce the Status Quo

Cognitive obstacles such as flawed information, bias, and loss aversion can impede the ability of policy makers to assess the viability of the strategy, develop alternatives, and make

necessary changes. Stanley and Sawyer argue that losing or ineffective strategies can become “sticky” when decision makers have insufficient or faulty information, or when bureaucratic or organizational filters and biases prevent leaders from accessing or using available information.⁹¹ Information overload can magnify the problem.⁹² Policy makers can get bombarded with information of varying reliability and contradictory assessments and forecasts. Making sense of it can be overwhelming. Confirmation bias can result.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to seek data that are compatible with and to interpret information in ways that conform to currently held beliefs.⁹³ Our theories, Albert Einstein reportedly observed, are what we measure.⁹⁴ This can result in decision makers placing higher credibility on confirmatory information or assessments while discounting the credibility or value of contradictory ones. More facts or better information might not correct the error. Decision-makers can dig in their heels when challenged. “Arguing the facts doesn’t help [when confronting confirmation bias],” cautions behavioral scientist Christopher Graves, “in fact, it makes the situation worse.”⁹⁵ Confirmation bias may thus entrench the status quo.⁹⁶ Confirmation bias, if present, should result in officials giving confirmatory information disproportionate weight, while discounting the value of contradictory information or interpreting such data to support pre-existing beliefs. The effect would be a tendency to favor arguments supporting the status quo over arguments to change.

⁹¹ Stanley and Sawyer (2009), 657.

⁹² Silver (2012), 12-13; McChrystal (2015), 233.

⁹³ Kahneman (2011), 81.

⁹⁴ Senge (2006), 164.

⁹⁵ Graves (2015).

⁹⁶ Iklè (1991), 17-37; Stanley (2009a), 53-55.

Loss aversion is a related problem. Most people, Kahneman contends, feel losses more intensely than gains.⁹⁷ Of course some are far more tolerant of loss – such as professional risk takers in the financial markets – but, within certain bounds, most seek to avoid certain losses and to hedge against uncertain ones. People even tend to prefer a sure thing that is of reasonably less expected value than a gamble that could have a little higher payoff.⁹⁸ This is part of the reason people buy insurance – they are paying a premium against uncertainty.

This tendency, however, is not absolute. Kahneman argues the following:

- In a mixed gamble, where both a gain and a loss are possible, loss aversion causes extremely risk averse choices.
- In bad choices, where a sure loss is compared to a larger loss that is merely probable, diminishing sensitivity causes risk seeking.⁹⁹

These are the main insights of prospect theory for which Kahneman and Tversky won a Nobel Prize in economics. An individual's reference point plays a critical role in decision-making.

⁹⁷ Kahneman (2013), 284

⁹⁸ Kahneman (2013), 273, 283-286.

⁹⁹ Kahneman (2013), 285.

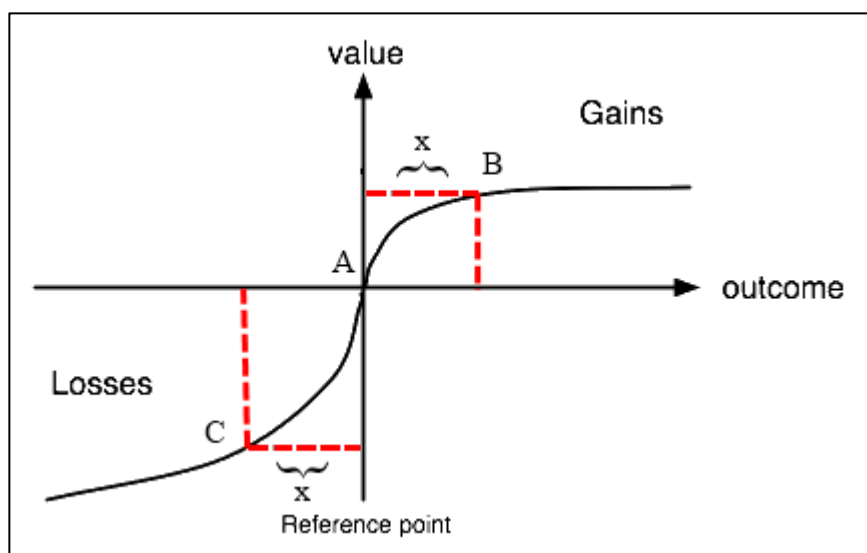


FIGURE 2 :PROSPECT THEORY¹⁰⁰

People tend to be risk averse when they are in a gain frame of reference. They do not want to forfeit their gains, and future gains tend to be less important to them than previous ones. They also tend to place much higher value on what they have, merely because they have it (also known as the endowment effect).¹⁰¹ The perception of military gains made during the intervention, and the reluctance to forfeit them and other achievements, can amplify loss aversion.¹⁰² To demonstrate that their strategy is working, leaders can get trapped in the rhetoric of progress.

In a loss frame of reference, however, people tend to be risk seeking. They prefer to take risks to avoid loss or to recover losses.¹⁰³ This, in part, accounts for why leaders could gamble for

¹⁰⁰ See Kahneman (2013), 283. This picture was accessed from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endowment_effect on 24 June 2014.

¹⁰¹ Kahneman (2013), 292-299; Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler (1990), 1325-1348; Kahneman and Tversky (1979). For criticism of the endowment effect, see Hanemann (1991), 635-647.

¹⁰² Iklè (1991), 83; Reiter notes that belligerents will raise demands after successes and lower then after defeats (2009, p. 15-16). Reiter, however, does not account for prospect theory's notion that potential future gains tend to be less important than previous ones.

¹⁰³ Kahneman (2013), 278-288. Kahneman & Tversky (1979)

resurrection rather than accept losing, even if a lost gamble could be irrecoverable.¹⁰⁴ Stanley and Sawyer suggest that leaders may not want to seek a negotiated outcome due to personal stakes such as power, prestige, and physical or financial security.¹⁰⁵ They may also have less prosaic motives. Policy-makers may prefer fighting to negotiating if they doubt the sincerity of the adversary. Dan Reiter analyzes examples from the U.S. Civil War to the Korean War in which uncertainties about the adversary's credibility led decision makers to want to continue fighting until the uncertainties were satisfactorily addressed.¹⁰⁶ An adversary that offers to capitulate, for instance, removes much uncertainty about their willingness to stop fighting. This is another form of a decisive victory outcome. Alternatively, an adversary can seek cease-fires and negotiations as a ploy to consolidate control of key areas, buy time to prepare for future military operations, or undermine their opponent's legitimacy. These kinds of credible commitment concerns can be amplified when dealing with insurgencies or armed non-state actors who may not feel bound by international law and the Geneva conventions.

In short, confirmation bias and loss aversion can create situations in which leaders believe a strategy is working even when there are compelling indications it is not. Even if leaders recognize a strategy is not succeeding, they may prefer to stick with it if they think the available alternatives could forfeit gains or undermine more important interests.¹⁰⁷ Finally, leaders may double-down or escalate a conflict in hopes of reversing a probable loss, even if the odds of succeeding are low and the likely costs are much higher.

¹⁰⁴ Downs and Rocke (1994), 362–380.

¹⁰⁵ See also Goemans (2000a); and Mansfield and Snyder (1995), 5-38.

¹⁰⁶ Reiter (2009). See also Stanley (2009a), 52-56.

¹⁰⁷ Kahneman (2013), 317, 354-345.

Internal Political and Bureaucratic Frictions Can Create Strategic Paralysis

Internal politics and bureaucratic frictions may contribute to strategic paralysis. States are not unitary actors that operate in lock-step or see issues from a single, shared, and objective perspective.¹⁰⁸ Differing assessments among decision-makers may entrench the status quo. The existing situation or strategy, the status quo, defines the reference points of discussion. Proposed changes can be viewed as gains or losses of influence, prestige, or power.¹⁰⁹ Prospect theory suggests that those deeply invested in a current strategy will fight hard to prevent change – likely harder than those advocating for a new direction. More disconcertingly, such stakeholders could manipulate information asymmetries in cynical efforts to block changes or undermine alternatives.¹¹⁰

Fred Iklè offers examples of the intense and potentially divisive nature of war termination discussions between patriots and “traitors.”¹¹¹ Stakeholders are likely to frame information in ways that support their conclusions and the interests of their constituents or departments.¹¹² “Those who want their country to pursue ambitious war aims will seek out the favorable military estimates and find reasons why negotiations ought to be avoided,” Iklè argues. “Those who want negotiations to move ahead will select the unfavorable military estimates to argue that war aims should be scaled down.”¹¹³ Political leaders may want to avoid creating winners

¹⁰⁸ Allison (1969), 689-718; Allison & Zelikow (1999), 255-324; Bendor & Hammond (1992): 301-322

¹⁰⁹ Kahneman (2013), 304-305; Iklè (1991), 84-105.

¹¹⁰ Stanley and Sawyer (2009), 657; Iklè (1991); Downs & Rocke (1994): 362-380; Feaver (2003); Allison & Zelikow (1999); Johnson and Tierney (2006).

¹¹¹ Iklè (1991), 59-83.

¹¹² Tversky & Kahneman (1986): S251-S278; Benedetto et al (2006), 684-687; Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988), 7-59; Mintz (2005), 94-98; Zagar (2011), 19-35; Allison (1969), 689-718; Allison & Zelikow (1999).

¹¹³ Iklè (1991), 84.

and losers in their national security teams. If so, lack of consensus for change tends to keep the status quo intact. At one point in time, the status quo was probably the agreed way forward.

Leaders could be reluctant to change a strategy over fears about constituent reactions. Audience costs is a political science term that refers to the public support penalties a leader suffers for escalating a foreign policy crisis and backing down.¹¹⁴ Michael Tomz conducted a wide range of experiments to determine whether and to what extent audience costs are real and affect national security choices. Tomz found that constituents tend to disapprove of leaders who make threats and then back down, and that leaders regard disapproval as a liability.¹¹⁵ To be sure, situations exist in which publics approve of backing down after making threats, as Stephen Walt observes of French and British publics during the 1936 Rhineland crisis and the Munich agreement in 1938.¹¹⁶ With the end of the Great War scarcely twenty years before, public sentiment remained rooted in keeping the peace. Tomz's experiments also suggest that the actual use of force increases the intensity of audience costs.¹¹⁷ These rose even further when U.S. casualties were involved.¹¹⁸ Political leaders are sensitive to audience costs because high approval ratings are considered an important source of Presidential power.¹¹⁹ Leaders may thus

¹¹⁴ Fearon (1994), 577–592; Tomz (2007), 821–40; Dorussen and Jongryn (2001), 395–426; Eyerman and Hart Jr. (1996), 597–616; Slantchev (2006), 445–77; Smith (1996), 16–40.

¹¹⁵ Tomz (2007), 822.

¹¹⁶ Walt (1999), 5–48.

¹¹⁷ Tomz (2007), 836.

¹¹⁸ Tomz (2007), 829.

¹¹⁹ Edwards 1977 113–114; Tomz (2007), 831–833; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002), 491–509; Krosnick and Kinder (1990), 497–512.

avoid changes that have high potential audience costs – such as seeking negotiations rather than decisive victory if the leader has painted the adversary in good versus evil terms.¹²⁰

Bureaucratic frictions may add paralysis. To manage national security affairs, the United States government has developed very powerful institutions. The National Security Council consists of the President of the United States, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense. They are supported by a national security staff at the White House, and by departmental staffs. The Department of Defense manages the military, the Department of State runs diplomatic efforts, the U.S. Agency for International Development (technically part of the State Department) coordinates international aid and development, and various agencies provide intelligence (Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, among others). A national security council meeting normally includes around 20 officials; fewer than half of whom have a voice. This national security structure, largely constructed in 1947, is also organized to address the major phases in conventional war. Diplomats aim to avoid war or build a coalition to fight it.¹²¹ Once war is declared, military forces fight to win, lose, or draw. Diplomats return to the fore to negotiate peace. Then aid agencies move out to repair the damage.

The United States has amassed greater global reach and obligations since 1947, stretching this structure. The same small group of people manage nearly every national security crisis across the globe, in addition to persistent matters such as space, cyber, climate change, nuclear weapons and materials, the rise of China, among many others. They also have domestic policy to manage and departments and agencies to run. The load is crushing. Even such incredibly

¹²⁰ This thesis is agnostic on the question of whether and to what extent democratic leaders are more affected than leaders of other regime types.

¹²¹ The National Security Act of 1947 (26 July 1947).

capable people lack the bandwidth to attain expert knowledge on every issue and their agencies may lack procedures for non-standard crises. In their landmark study of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow explain how organizational processes and bureaucratic politics can result in frictions that impede decision-making and execution.¹²² The organizational process model explains how bureaucratic procedures can place limits on a decision-maker's freedom of action.¹²³ Instead of examining a crisis holistically, governments tend to break-down the problem along organizational lines. Each bureaucracy addresses its own portion of the issue. A result of this process is "satisficing" – approaches or solutions that are not optimal but are perceived to adequately address the issue and limit near-term uncertainties and risks. Government agencies use their existing procedures to execute assigned tasks. Such procedures are used to master normal, peacetime routines. When applied during a crisis, they can result in delays, major oversights, or rigidity.

The bureaucratic politics model, on the other hand, explains decision-making as a product of politicking and negotiations among the government's top leaders. These leaders have varying levels of power based upon their charisma, relationship to the president, and their interpersonal and persuasive skills. The intense discussions, often filled with miscommunication and misunderstandings, can result in decisions derived from consensus that differ significantly from what any individual leader would prefer. Conversely, individuals may take actions that the group would not condone.¹²⁴

The organizational process and bureaucratic politics models provide powerful explanations for why the United States government may develop sub-optimal intervention strategies that over-

¹²² Allison and Zelikow (1999).

¹²³ Allison and Zelikow (1999), 143-196.

¹²⁴ Allison and Zelikow (1999), 255-324.

emphasize the military instrument and conform to implicit assumptions about decisive victory. They also illustrate reasons why losing or ineffective strategies could be difficult to change – the same decision-makers that agreed on the strategy have a vested interest in trying to make it work. This could lead the United States to tinker on the margins to shore up perceived weak points in the war effort rather than to overturn the existing strategy in favor of a new one. This is one of the reasons why, as Stanley argues above, changes in governing coalitions are often necessary for a change in strategy.

These explanations require supplements to address some unique challenges of irregular war. Allison and Zelikow were examining a crisis involving impossibly high stakes, but that entailed no large-scale deployments of military and civilian capabilities into a foreign country, no ground combat, no state-building requirements, and no host country patron-client challenges. Their models, for instance, can illuminate but not address adequately how bureaucratic agencies deployed to a foreign country interact with one another and with the host country's officials. Can such interactions lead to something worse than satisficing? Instead of sub-optimal outcomes, can these interactions damage the ability of the United States to achieve its aims? Likewise, neither model can fully account for cognitive problems such as confirmation bias that impede accurate assessments and changes to strategy. Finally, the models are not intended to account for agency problems with a host-nation government, particularly the consequences of misalignment of interests and moral hazard.

Case research and organizational theory can enrich the understanding of these challenges for interventions against insurgencies.¹²⁵ The U.S. national security architecture, as noted above, is organized to manage a large-scale conventional war in which the major phases are arranged in sequence: diplomacy-military-diplomacy-aid and development. For irregular war

¹²⁵ Tett (2015) and McChrystal et al (2015).

interventions, these agencies must operate concurrently – success may require the simultaneous work of building government and security force capacity, fighting the insurgency, developing an economy, and organizing regional and international support. The powerful nature of American bureaucracies, however, can undermine their ability to operate together effectively in conflict zones. Moreover, the United States tends not to invest an individual on the ground with the authority and responsibility to coordinate and manage the full range of American efforts. President Kennedy was in charge during the Cuban Missile Crisis – an event that captured his full attention and that of his cabinet. During irregular wars in far-off places, U.S. Presidents might have much higher priorities and other factors that compete for their time and energy. This can result in no one having the responsibility and authority to manage full-time the full-range of American efforts deployed to the conflict. U.S. government agencies thus tend to operate in bureaucratic silos, with a senior representative (commander, ambassador, etc.) deployed to the host country to manage individual agency efforts. Examining the interactions among these silos and their consequences can be important to understanding the war's trajectory and why decision-makers in Washington might be slow to recognize major problems. Difficulties, for instance, can arise at the interface of these silos. Seams or gaps in authority and responsibility offer opportunities that host nation actors or adversaries can exploit (see next section). Fault lines, instances where silos affect one another, can create frictions.¹²⁶ Actions by one agency may damage the efforts of others and undermine overall national objectives. These problems are often missed in the assessments, because each agency measures progress within their respective silos. The tendency to aggregate in-silo metrics and milestones to assess overall progress can create a misleading strategic picture. The result of these challenges is that

¹²⁶ Seams and fault lines are terms of art used by this thesis to describe problems that can arise with bureaucratic silos. Seams denote gaps between silos that can be exploited by host nation actors or adversaries. Fault lines describe problems in which efforts in one silo undermine efforts in others.

the whole can be less than the sum of its parts.¹²⁷ Robert W. Komer's classic study *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing* outlines how on-the-ground turf battles, bureaucratic infighting, institutional inertia, and bureaucratic silos undermined U.S. efforts in Vietnam.¹²⁸ This thesis will illustrate how these factors damaged American efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and impeded the ability of the Bush and Obama administrations to recognize when a strategy was failing and to make needed changes. Overall, the case research and insights leading to Hypothesis #2 supplement the Allison's models for interventions against insurgencies.

Patron-Client Problems Can Impede Efforts to Modify the Strategy

An insurgency battles a host nation government for the right to rule all or part of the country.¹²⁹ An intervening power generally aims to help the host nation government defeat the insurgency. U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine presumes implicitly that the aims and interest of the host nation government and the external counterinsurgent are aligned.¹³⁰ This seems more the exception than the rule. Political scientist Thomas Grant argues that good allies are rare among host nation governments, because effectively governed countries tend not to provide "inspiration or excuse for guerilla war."¹³¹ This problem is known in political science jargon as adverse selection. "The same governmental shortcomings that facilitate the emergence of an insurgency," notes Walter Ladwig, "also undercut the effectiveness of the counterinsurgent

¹²⁷ For more on organizational silos, see Rasmussen (2015); Select Strategies (2002); Tett (2015), 25-138; McChrystal et al (2015), 20, 118.

¹²⁸ Komer (1992).

¹²⁹ The U.S. Department of Defense defines insurgency as "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region." JP 3-24 (2013), GL-5.

¹³⁰ Conversation with political scientist Stephen Biddle, July 2009, Kabul, Afghanistan. Byman (2006), 3.

¹³¹ Grant (1992), 261.

response.”¹³² These kinds of conflicts, Steven Biddle argues, are “strongly associated with weak states and corrupt, unrepresentative, clientelist regimes.”¹³³ A counterinsurgency is thus unlikely to succeed without reforms by the host government, Daniel Byman contends, “but these regimes are likely to subvert the reforms that threaten the existing power structure.”¹³⁴

Adverse selection is part of a larger phenomenon known by political scientists as principal-agent theory. This theory, developed by economists to explain interactions by parties to a contract, has been used to explain challenges in which one actor (the principal) delegates authority to another actor (the agent) to carry out actions on its behalf.¹³⁵ The matter is complicated for interventions by the fact that host nation governments are sovereign and of equal status to their external supporters in international law. To acknowledge this difference, I will use Ladwig’s term, patron-client relationship.¹³⁶ The patron, in this case the United States, supports a host nation government (the client) with the primary aim of advancing American strategic interests. The faster a host nation can govern and secure itself, the faster the United States can withdraw its troops and reduce capacity-building, aid, and assistance expenditures.

This has proven difficult in practice. Three of the major challenges in patron-client relationships are interest misalignment, information asymmetry, and moral hazard. These problems can impede the intervening power’s ability to change a losing or ineffective strategy, damage capacity-building efforts, and undermine the prospects of a successful outcome. Interest misalignment occurs because the primary objectives of the intervening power

¹³² Ladwig (Summer 2016), 103.

¹³³ Biddle, Baker & Macdonald (2016), 9.

¹³⁴ Byman (Fall 2006), 82

¹³⁵ Downs and Rocke (1994), 362-380; Feaver (2003); Salehyan (2010), 493-515.

¹³⁶ Ladwig (2016), 105

(defeating the insurgency, enable the host nation to secure and govern itself) competes with powerful incentives for the client (maintaining power and international largesse). This difference results in the host government promoting political, economic, sectarian, ethnic, or other arrangements that benefit its core supporters – even if these same measures are inspiring the insurgency.¹³⁷ Many of the common prescriptions for counterinsurgency, such as political and economic reform, a professional military, greater political inclusion and reconciliation, can be more threatening to the regime than the insurgency itself.¹³⁸ “The regime’s interests are thus typically focused less on external enemies than on *internal* threats from rival elites,” observes Stephen Biddle, “and especially the state military itself, which is often seen as a threat at least equal to that of foreign enemies.”¹³⁹ This complicates efforts to develop host nation security forces. Because armed elites can pose a much greater threat than the insurgency does, regimes tend to undertake various forms of appeasement, cooptation or enfeeblement.¹⁴⁰ In Samuel Huntington’s framework, they opt for a form of subjective control to prevent a coup.¹⁴¹

United States military advisors raised on the principle of objective control, in which the military agrees to be apolitical in return for substantial professional autonomy, can have difficulty recognizing the difference in their host nation partner. “The kind of powerful, politically independent, technically proficient, non-corrupt military the United States seeks,” notes Biddle, “is often seen by the partner state as a far greater threat to their self-interest than

¹³⁷ de Mesquita and Smith (2007), 254.

¹³⁸ Ladwig (2016), 99.

¹³⁹ Biddle (2016), 9.

¹⁴⁰ Stanley and Sawyer (2009), 657. See also de Mesquita and Siverson (1995), 841-855; Chiozza and Goemans (2004), 604-619; Goemans (2000a), 555-579.

¹⁴¹ Huntington (1957), 80-83.

foreign invasion or terrorist infiltration.”¹⁴² This is part of a second major problem, information asymmetry. The host nation is unlikely to be forthcoming in divulging interests and intentions that drive kleptocratic, sectarian, ethno-centric, or clientelist practices. The client is likely to manipulate the patron to maintain military and economic support while maximizing autonomy. Hiding information, disguising intentions and interests, and paying lip-service to the patron’s demands are typical parts of the playbook. “In reality,” Ladwig suggests, the patron “has, at best, only indirect control over its client’s economic, political, and military policies.”¹⁴³

This set of problems creates moral hazard. Because the patron is committed to the client’s survival, the client does not bear the full consequences of its actions. This may create incentives for the client or rival elites to engage in high risk behaviors, knowing that the patron will not allow things to go too far.¹⁴⁴ To encourage reform, patrons may reassure clients that the aid and support will be forthcoming if the regime undertakes actions the patron deems necessary. To maintain domestic support for the ongoing assistance and troop presence, the patron may paint the client’s survival as a vital interest. This combination could raise doubts in the client’s mind that the patron will halt the intervention or support if the client does not comply with the reforms. Why risk internal instability by enacting painful and potentially destabilizing reforms if the insurgency threat will be met by the intervening power anyway?¹⁴⁵ Conversely, greater publicity of the client’s problems may reduce the patron’s public support for the intervention. This could lead the client to avoid the clear and present danger that enacting reforms may pose and take risk against the more distant threat (the insurgency) if the intervening power is going

¹⁴² Biddle (2016), 10. See also Desch (2001).

¹⁴³ Ladwig (2016), 103.

¹⁴⁴ Odom (1992), 9, 103–104, 213–215; Ladwig (2016), 104; Biddle (2016), 6–7.

¹⁴⁵ Biddle (2016), 12; Ladwig (2016), 104.

to leave anyway or not make good on its promises.¹⁴⁶ In short, a client has incentive to resist changes that may heighten the risk of domestic instability even if such reforms would create a greater chance to defeat the insurgency or bring it into a peace process. This set of problems could help explain why transition strategies, as explained above, may have limited prospects for success.

How can patrons sway clients? Walter Ladwig examines two types of influence strategies patrons normally use: inducements and conditionality.¹⁴⁷ Inducement seeks to persuade a client to change behavior with promises of aid and support. This approach, Ladwig notes, tends to be preferred by U.S. policymakers. Conditionality, on the other hand, uses rewards and punishments to affect a client's behavior and reduce moral hazards. To know if the client is enacting the reforms or shirking, the patron must use intrusive monitoring.¹⁴⁸ This can be very resource intensive and unpopular with the host nation. Conditionality increases the likelihood of frictions in the patron-client relationship. The client may highlight or amplify these challenges to reduce the willingness of the patron to enact such measures. Inducements is the path of least resistance for the patron, but Ladwig and Biddle show that conditionality is more likely to be effective.

The presence of these cognitive obstacles, political frictions, and patron-client problems can impede the intervening power's ability to modify a losing or ineffective strategy. These obstacles may become so powerful, Stanley and Sawyer argue, that a shift in the domestic governing coalition for the intervening power may be necessary for policy and strategy to

¹⁴⁶ Biddle (1026), 12.

¹⁴⁷ Ladwig (2016), 105-8.

¹⁴⁸ Biddle (1026), 11-13.

change.¹⁴⁹ Fully eighty-four percent of the time since World War Two, they show, war termination came about as new domestic coalitions determined that the prospects for decisive military victory were too low. Nearly forty-one percent of the time, the change in governing coalition was determined to be the causal factor for the bid to end the war.¹⁵⁰ This analysis leads to hypothesis #2: *Cognitive obstacles, political frictions, and patron-client problems can impede the ability to recognize and abandon an ineffective or losing strategy.*

Asymmetric Bargaining May Undermine a Fall back to Transition or Negotiations

The notion of falling back from decisive victory to transition can be appealing because it avoids the need to negotiate with the insurgency or its sponsor. As discussed above, transition is based on the crossover point premise: that the intervening power can alter the relative balance of power in the conflict by degrading or defeating the insurgency while building the capacity of the host nation's government and security forces. "It all adds up to diminishing the strength of the insurgency, increasing the capabilities of the government and its forces," said counterinsurgency expert John Nagl, "and reaching a *crossover point* where the host nation forces can carry on with minimal outside assistance" [emphasis added].¹⁵¹ As U.S. President George W. Bush put it for Iraq, "As the Iraqis stand up, we can stand down."¹⁵² The patron-client problems discussed above, however, can prevent that point from being reached.

The host nation security forces might increase in size, but corruption and poor leadership may degrade readiness and battlefield performance. Predatory behavior can undermine the

¹⁴⁹ Stanley and Sawyer (2009), 658; Stanley (2009b); Stanley (2009a), 42-82.

¹⁵⁰ Stanley and Sawyer (2009), 669; Stanley (2009b)

¹⁵¹ Manea and Nagl (2012).

¹⁵² Bush (28 June 2005). See also Manea and Nagl (6 February 2012).

government's ability to win the battle of legitimacy and inspire disaffected groups to support the insurgency. Conversely, too slow a capacity-building effort and insufficient action against the insurgency could enable the latter to grow so strong that the host nation can never catch up. As the intervening power withdraws from the conflict, the incentives for reform may decrease if internal rivals remain a more immediate threat than the insurgency. If political leaders believe that the payoff is not worth the political cost, they may be unwilling to accept a small presence of foreign forces as trainers or advisors. The result of these patron-client problems are larger losses of influence for the intervening power than might be expected.¹⁵³ Transition might not be a low-risk alternative if decisive victory fails.¹⁵⁴ If the so-called crossover point remains elusive, the intervening power could be left with an unappealing choice between withdrawal (and hope the client survives) or an open-ended and potentially expensive presence.

An intervening power might consider falling back to negotiations, instead. Donald Wittman, writing in 1979 in the wake of the end of the Vietnam conflict, developed a rational bargaining model to explain how a settlement to end a war can be achieved.¹⁵⁵ In a nutshell, he argues, states tend to begin a war with high expected-utility. The greater the expectations of each party, the less likelihood for bargaining.¹⁵⁶ As the war progresses, combatants exchange information about relative strengths and weaknesses and the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes.¹⁵⁷ Political scientist Harrison Wagner argues that war is not simply a contest to disarm one another, but a bargaining process in which states use force or the threat of force to influence

¹⁵³ Biddle et al (2016), 7.

¹⁵⁴ Paul (2013), 177-8.

¹⁵⁵ Wittman (1979), 743.

¹⁵⁶ It is possible that to avoid the potential costs of war both sides would negotiate for lesser outcomes than they might achieve via conflict. See Wagner (July 2000), 469-484 and Pillar (1983).

¹⁵⁷ Reiter (2009), 8-21; Slantchev (2003), 621-632; Reiter (March 2003), 27-43; Fearon (1998), 269-305; Filson Werner (2002), 819-38; R. Wagner (2000), 469-484; Pillar (1983).

other states.¹⁵⁸ This is part of the reason wars generally stop short of complete destruction of one side or the other.¹⁵⁹

Demands from external actors for cease-fires and negotiations, however, may go unheeded until the war settles into a stalemate. I. William Zartman argues that even if the substance of proposed solutions to the conflict might be mutually acceptable, the right timing is equally necessary. A so-called “mutually hurting stalemate” occurs when the parties are locked into a conflict that they cannot escalate to victory, the deadlock is painful to both parties (though not necessarily equally hurtful), and they both decide to seek a way out.¹⁶⁰ Provided a way out is perceived to be available and acceptable, the conflict is “ripe” for a negotiated outcome.¹⁶¹

How does this apply to interventions against insurgencies? The scholarship tends to focus on conventional wars with uniformed military forces that fight to win, lose, or draw. Irregular war that includes an intervening power has a different dynamic. Early bargaining opportunities may exist, but are likely limited.¹⁶² If the insurgency seeks to bargain but is rejected, it must surrender or fight for survival. The military contest is asymmetrical. The insurgent, being the militarily weaker party, generally avoids decisive battle. Guerilla warfare is designed to wear out the stronger party in a strategy of exhaustion.¹⁶³ The insurgency may lose every pitched battle, but that is not necessarily relevant to the outcome. An insurgent’s strength grows with

¹⁵⁸ Wagner (2000), 481. See also Schelling (1966).

¹⁵⁹ Clausewitz (1984), 91; Pillar (1983), 200; Wagner 481-3.

¹⁶⁰ Zartman (2001), 8; Wittman (1979), 747-8, esp. note 6; Reiter (2009), 8-21.

¹⁶¹ Zartman (2001), 9.

¹⁶² Wagner (2000); Slantchev (2003); A more mature insurgency could have a much higher expected utility, which would likely limit potential bargaining space even further.

¹⁶³ See Mao (1961), Taber (2002); O’Neill (2005). The avoidance of decisive battles occurs when the insurgent force is the much weaker party. That power transition may change, as in Mao’s phase III war of movement. The Viet Minh defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 is as example.

increased tangible support from the population and external actors. The insurgency's political and social efforts seek to increase local control and support. Military actions keep the insurgency relevant and undermine the government's ability to maintain security and hold a monopoly of violence. A sustainable insurgency has the potential to get stronger over time, especially if the government is predatory and exclusionary.

The intervening power and host nation may escalate the conflict, but the insurgency has a chance of succeeding if it survives with tangible support intact. Once the intervening power tires of the war and begins to withdraw, the insurgency can play for time. The intervening power might be more open to negotiations at this point, but these could be less appealing to the insurgency. The latter will probably seek to maximize their leverage before exploring negotiations. They are likely better off waiting until after the withdrawal to test the host nation government fighting on its own. The insurgency could be willing to negotiate concessions over the external power's withdrawal, but not to end the conflict.¹⁶⁴ This occurred as the United States negotiated with North Vietnam to withdraw from South Vietnam and the Soviets negotiated with the United States and Pakistan to withdraw from Afghanistan.¹⁶⁵

What if the external power elects to stay indefinitely, but just at a much lower level? The models offered by Wittman, Wagner, and Zartman can become helpful again.¹⁶⁶ As the intervening force reaches its sustainable level, the insurgency will likely seek to maximize battlefield gains. Once the cost of further gains by each side are perceived to outweigh the benefits, a mutually hurting stalemate may set in. In such cases, negotiations could begin when

¹⁶⁴ For further discussion of incentives for negotiation, see Zartman (2001), 8; Wittman (1979), 747-8, esp. note 6. Reiter (2009), 8-21

¹⁶⁵ For Vietnam: Kissinger (2003) and Karnow (1997); For the Soviets in Afghanistan: Braithwaite (2011) and Tomsen (2011). Note, these negotiations were with 3rd party states providing tangible support to the insurgency, not with the insurgent groups themselves.

¹⁶⁶ Wittman (1979), 750-754; Wagner, 479; Zartman (2001)

the situation is ripe. Negotiations with an insurgency, however, are likely to include greater credible commitment challenges than negotiations with a state. The Northern Ireland conflict is a good case in point. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) was not going to be strong enough to win an outright victory or push the British military and police off the island. Similarly, the sustainability of the PIRA's local and external tangible support made decisive victory over them highly unlikely, too.¹⁶⁷ Credible commitment challenges, major differences in leader opinion, and audience costs on all sides made the move to negotiations difficult and time consuming. Nonetheless, clandestine talks persisted and eventually produced the Good Friday Agreement that put a durable and credible peace process in place.¹⁶⁸

The intended path towards a negotiated outcome may also play an important role. The very deliberate process in Northern Ireland stands in contrast to more hasty efforts to broker peace deals in other cases. Insurgencies and civil wars damage the fabric and cohesion of a society. Peace deals in a low-trust environment, even if struck, are likely to be short-lived and destabilizing.¹⁶⁹ The Peshawar (1992) and Islamabad (1993) Accords were efforts to create power-sharing deals among major Afghan mujahideen factions. They failed and set the stage for the Afghan civil war that would bring al Qaeda to Afghanistan and the Taliban to power.¹⁷⁰ In Sierra Leone, the Abidjan (1996) and Lome (1999) Accords were short-lived efforts power-sharing deals with the RUF.¹⁷¹ Host nation governments, fearing that an intervening power is

¹⁶⁷ Holland (1999); Elliot, ed. (2007); McKittrick and McVea (2002); English (2003).

¹⁶⁸ Keogh and Haltzel, eds (1994); Elliot (2007).

¹⁶⁹ Walter (1997), 335-364. See also Caplan (2012), 316; Dobbins and Miller (2013).

¹⁷⁰ Tomsen (2011), 367-450; Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 189-224. Al Qaeda was invited to Afghanistan by the Rabbani government before the Taliban took power.

¹⁷¹ Gberie (2005); Ibrahim Abdullah, *Between Democracy and Terror: The Sierra Leone Civil War* (Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa 2000); John L. Hirsch, *Sierra Leone: Diamonds*

seeking a separate peace with the insurgency or a potential de-stabilizing peace deal, has incentive to scuttle talks.

These kinds of bargaining asymmetries and challenges suggest that the ability to fall back from decisive victory to the transition or negotiated settlement war termination methods could be less available for intervening powers in irregular conflicts than for classic conventional wars. These challenges result in hypothesis #3: *When the United States tires of the war and decides to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries can undermine the prospects of a favorable outcome.*

Foreshadowing the Problems: A Brief Examination of Vietnam

The war termination problems the United States encountered during the major post-9/11 interventions may not be an aberration. The Vietnam conflict suffered from the same factors, albeit in subtly different ways. Explanations of the poor outcome in Vietnam include three schools of thought. The counterinsurgency school argues that Westmoreland and the U.S. Army were fixated on conventional war and unable to adapt their tactics to meet the demands of fighting an insurgency.¹⁷² An alternative, suggested by Westmoreland in his memoirs, is that the nature of the conflict required the U.S. military to focus on fighting the primary threat from North Vietnamese and Viet Cong main force units, while the South Vietnamese military not committed to the conventional fight would need to take on the guerillas.¹⁷³ This school suggests that the campaign design and tactics were right but the war was largely unwinnable due to factors beyond Westmoreland's control. A third school examines some of these factors from a

and the Struggle for Democracy (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000). David Keen, *Conflict & Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey, 2005).

¹⁷² Herring (April 1982), 57-63; Krepinevich (1896); Sorley (1999); Lewy (1978); Nagl (2005).

¹⁷³ See Westmoreland (1976a (p. 145) and 1976b); Carland (April 2004), 533-574; Andrade (June 2008), 145-181; Birtle (October 2008), 1213- 1247; and Moyar (2006), 335-336.

civil-military lens including civilian micromanagement of military operations, the failure of military officials to provide candid advice, and how political decision not to mobilize the country may have undercut public support for the war.¹⁷⁴

Examination of war termination challenges enriches these perspectives. An important difference from the Iraq and Afghanistan case studies is that a negotiated outcome – in the form of North Vietnamese capitulation – was discussed from 1964-66 during deliberations over whether to escalate the Vietnam war.¹⁷⁵ President Johnson wanted to limit the costs of supporting South Vietnam and had no intention of conducting a large-scale ground invasion of North Vietnam or using nuclear weapons to force them to sue for peace. The successful use of graduated pressure during the Cuban Missile Crisis became an important reference point for a lower-cost alternative in Vietnam.¹⁷⁶ Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and other civilian leaders believed the United States could use a similar model to carefully raise the pressure on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) to compel them to stop supporting the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) insurgency against the South Vietnam government.¹⁷⁷ This approach, they believed, would limit the costs to the United States and avoid the risk of Chinese or Russian intervention. The uniformed military, however, wanted to either sharply escalate

¹⁷⁴ Summers Jr. (1982); Caverley (Winter 2009/10), 119-157; McMaster (1997), location 1791 of 10792 [kindle edition]; Karnow (1997), 511-525; Schandler (2009), 3.

¹⁷⁵ For the evolution of U.S. strategy see the following documents: Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, August–December 1963: Document 331 (26 November 1963), 637-40; Document 374 (December 21, 1963), 732-3; Document 380 (31 December 1963), 745-6; The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, Part 1, p. 199-239; McMaster (1997), 1440-1559 of 10792; FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964: Document 84 (March 16, 1964), 154, 160; Document (March 17, 1964), 172-3; Document 201 (June 5, 1964), 462-5; Document 420 (November 23, 1964), 932-5; Document 424 (November 24, 1964), 943-5; Document 428 (November 27, 1964), 958-60; Document 433 (December 2, 1964), 969-74; Document 435 (December 3, 1964), 974-8; FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume III, Vietnam, June–December 1965: Document 93 (July 27, 1965), 262-3. A negotiated outcome was discussed as early as 1962. See Goodman (1986), 1-2.

¹⁷⁶ McNamara used graduated pressure to convince the Soviet Union to abandon plans to put nuclear ballistic missiles in Cuba, while avoiding the risk of a wider war. He over-rode highly aggressive military advice that might have escalated the conflict out of control. Cyrus Vance (9 March 1970), 11; McMaster (1997), 643, 1549 of 10792.

¹⁷⁷ FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964, Document 201 (June 5, 1964), 462-5; Document 304 (August 8, 1964), 651-3.

the conflict to compel the DRV to give up its proxies (which meant widespread bombing of North Vietnam and perhaps a ground force invasion) or get out.¹⁷⁸

The odds against success in Vietnam may have been greater than for post 9/11 Afghanistan or Iraq. In the latter two, the United States overthrew existing regimes. These were replaced by new governments before the insurgencies fomented (although resistance began immediately in Iraq, and within a year in Afghanistan). In Vietnam, the United States needed to rescue a deeply troubled client.¹⁷⁹ By 1964 the NLF had significant internal support as well as external support and sanctuary from North Vietnam – controlling roughly 40 percent of the country.¹⁸⁰ The South Vietnamese government was deeply kleptocratic and losing popular legitimacy.¹⁸¹ Either situation, unless reversed, normally results in a loss for the government. South Vietnam had both from the start of the U.S. intervention.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Harold K. Johnson (8 January 1964); Joint Chiefs Memorandum 46-64, 22 January 1964, “Vietnam and Southeast Asia,” *The Pentagon Papers*, vol 3, pp. 496-99; Schandler (1984), 23-24; FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964: Document 66 (March 2, 1964), 116-7; Document 70 (March 4, 1964), 129; Document 191 (June 2, 1964), 437-441; The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, part 1, chapter 9, p. 241-264; McMaster (1997), location 1351, 1491, 1914 of 10792. The so-called “Rostow Thesis” hypothesized that graduated military actions reinforced by political and economic pressures could cause a nation to reduce or eliminate support for an insurgency. This notion for North Vietnam was tested in a September 1964 wargame called SIGMA II, which concluded that such a bombing campaign would more likely stiffen North Vietnam’s resolve, while eroding public support in the United States. The conclusions, however, had little effect on U.S. strategy. (McMaster (1997), p. 3221 – 3277 of 10792).

¹⁷⁹ Young (1991), 60-88; Karnow (1997), 240-251; The Pentagon Papers (17 January 1961), Memorandum for Secretary of Defense from Brigadier General Edward G. Lansdale, 69, 72-3

¹⁸⁰ Duiker (1995), 164-65.

¹⁸¹ FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964: Document 339 (September 6, 1964), 733-736; FRUS 1964–1968, Volume III, Vietnam, June–December 1965: Document 40 (Undated), 108.

¹⁸² See *The Pentagon Papers*, Special National Intelligence Estimate, August 1960, Part IV.A.5. “Evolution of the War. Origins of the Insurgency,”; Taylor (1972), 301; FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume I, Vietnam, 1964: Document 84 (March 16, 1964). 155-158; 156. Document 156 (May 15, 1964), 328-9; Document 341 (September 8, 1964). 742-6; McNamara et al (1999), 369; Sheehan (1989), 201–66; Gibson (1986), 88; Demma (1989), 619–694; Karnow (1997), p. 339.

The United States was in a difficult position. As the discussions over strategy continued into 1965, the civilian leadership understood the prospects of success to be low.¹⁸³ The Johnson administration began to test the graduated pressure concept by escalating the conflict while attempting to start negotiations.¹⁸⁴ They discussed unilateral suspension of military actions, which prompted significant resistance from the military.¹⁸⁵ Johnson believed he needed to show the American people and the world that he was as serious about peace as it was about fighting.¹⁸⁶ “The weakest chink in our armor,” he surmised, “is public opinion.”¹⁸⁷ When Johnson said that he was very reluctant to go against the views of the Joint Chiefs, McNamara advised, “We decide what we want and impose it on them. They see this as a total military problem—nothing will change their views.”¹⁸⁸

Johnson eventually approved a 37-day bombing pause beginning 24 December and a 30-hour Christmas cease-fire.¹⁸⁹ Washington wanted to make clear that the halt was a serious move toward peace which required a suitable concession from North Vietnam to keep the process moving forward. The United States engaged in efforts with 34 countries to communicate to the

¹⁸³ Johnson Library (February 3, 1965) John McCone Memoranda of Meetings with the President; FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume II, Vietnam, January-June 1965: Document 42 (January 27, 1965), 95-7; Document 84 (February 7, 1965), 175-181; Volume III June – December 1965: Document 235 (December 18, 1965), 662.

¹⁸⁴ FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 189 (November 3, 1965), 514-528; Document 194 (November 9, 1965), 535-554; Document 238 (December 21, 1965), 677.

¹⁸⁵ FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 228 (December 13, 1965), 638; Document 237 (December 21, 1965), 673.

¹⁸⁶ FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 208 (November 27, 1965), 582; Document 223 (December 7, 1965), 620-1.

¹⁸⁷ FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 231 (December 17, 1965), 647.

¹⁸⁸ FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 231 (December 17, 1965), 647.

¹⁸⁹ FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 238 (December 21, 1965), 677.

North Vietnamese and the world America's desire for a peaceful resolution.¹⁹⁰ As Rusk put it, "We have put everything into the basket of peace except the surrender of South Viet-Nam."¹⁹¹

The graduated pressure concept overestimated the effects of strategic bombing and underestimated the strength of DRV's resolve and the consequences of GVN's political dysfunction.¹⁹² The Americans expected the bombing pause to signal a willingness to bargain. The DRV dangled the faint hope of negotiations to reduce military pressure. By linking bombing to peace talks, the Johnson administration unwittingly fell into this trap. "Hanoi used negotiations as a tactic of warfare to buy time to strengthen its military capabilities in South Vietnam and weaken the will of those on the side of Saigon," Goodman summarizes. "Rather than serving as an alternative to warfare, consequently, the Vietnam negotiations were an extension of it."¹⁹³ This pattern, he argues, protracted the war and played to the DRV's advantage.¹⁹⁴

The result of the civil-military frictions over strategy was a thinly camouflaged bureaucratic struggle. Unable to convince the uniformed military of their logic, the Johnson administration micromanaged military operations and authorities in the hope of using graduated pressure to bring about peace talks. The uniformed military, on other hand, played bureaucratic games to

¹⁹⁰ For examples, see FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 262 (December 28, 1965), 732-4; Document 265 (December 29, 1965), 736-7; Document 266 and 267 (December 29, 1965), 738; Documents 268 and 269 (December 29, 1965), 739-40; Document 271 (December 29, 1965), 744-7; Document 272 (December 30, 1965), 748.

¹⁹¹ FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 247 (December 27, 1965), 707.

¹⁹² FRUS Volume III June – December 1965: Document 199 (November 11, 1965), 463-8; Document 148 (September 22, 1965), 403 (NOTE: the Special NIE does suggest that recent U.S. bombing and willingness to escalate have shaken DRV and VC confidence); Document 184 (October 27, 1965), 500-504; Document 212 (November 30, 1965), 592; Document 239 (December 21, 1965), 680-5, "While the air strikes against logistics facilities and sensitive lines of communications are causing major distribution problems, these operations have not significantly reduced the DRV capability to continue to support the Communist forces in Laos and South Vietnam."

¹⁹³ Goodman (1986), p. ix.

¹⁹⁴ Goodman (1986), p. 9, 19, 37-46, 93-112.

prod McNamara and Johnson into escalating the war toward the troop levels and authorities they believed were necessary to force DRV capitulation.¹⁹⁵ U.S. troop levels surged from approximately 200,000 in 1965 to over 500,000 by 1968.¹⁹⁶ The United States adopted several different operational approaches to defeating the insurgency, to include taking over the war effort in 1965, but was never able to reduce the insurgency's sustainable support or pressure the South Vietnamese government to govern effectively enough to win the battle of legitimacy in the insurgent heartlands.¹⁹⁷ As a South Vietnamese official explained to journalist Stanley Karnow in late 1964, "Our big advantage over the Americans is that they want to win the war more than we do."¹⁹⁸

This losing strategy became intractable. Assessments were made within bureaucratic silos and then aggregated to convey an overall picture. Doing so painted a misleading picture of the situation. Officials remained upbeat despite the worsening security situation.¹⁹⁹ Such assurances impeded strategic adaptation, as debates between advocates and skeptics grew poisonous.²⁰⁰ The Johnson administration and the military command began losing credibility. Even though Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in May 1967 counseled President Johnson to "negotiate an unfavorable peace," he could not overcome the status quo bias.²⁰¹ The 1968 Tet Offensive was a psychological shock to the United States, irrevocably damaged public

¹⁹⁵ McMaster (1997), 3063, 3210-3678, 3875, of 10792; FRUS Volume I 1964: Document 331 (August 27, 1964), 413-7.

¹⁹⁶ Paul et al (2013), 33.

¹⁹⁷ *The Pentagon Papers*, Part IV. C. 5, p. 116-123 and Part IV. C. 6. a, p. 1-7; McNamara, 1999, 353-4; Nagl (2008), 131-148.

¹⁹⁸ Karnow (1997), p. 399.

¹⁹⁹ Karnow (1997), 18; McMaster (1997); Westmoreland (21 November 1967); Sorely (1992), 192-200.

²⁰⁰ Karnow (1997), 488-527; Sorely (1992), 199-200; Iklè (1991), 59, 84-5.

²⁰¹ Sheehan (1989), 684.

support for the war, and was a key factor in Johnson declining to run for re-election.²⁰² Although the insurgency suffered heavy losses and never fully recovered, their residual strength combined with that of the North Vietnamese Regular Army sustained the conflict. The Soviet Union reportedly agreed in 1968 to facilitate talks between the Johnson administration and Hanoi. Biographer John A. Farrell argues that Nixon sabotaged the effort by convincing South Vietnamese President Thieu to object.²⁰³

A change in the administration was necessary to alter the strategy. Richard Nixon won the 1968 election in part by promising to end the Vietnam War. By 1969 he began troop withdrawals and the process of “Vietnamization” to turn the war back over to the South Vietnamese.²⁰⁴ Transition efforts, however, were undermined by severe patron-client problems. The South Vietnamese government remained unable to win the battle of legitimacy in insurgent controlled areas. Meanwhile, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger began secret talks with North Vietnam in August 1969.²⁰⁵ The clear U.S. intention to withdraw from the war limited American bargaining leverage.²⁰⁶ The United States and DRV concluded an initial agreement in October 1972, but South Vietnam rejected the accord and talks deadlocked.²⁰⁷ To break the impasse, Nixon authorized Operation Linebacker II which unleashed a massive bombing campaign against the DRV from 18-29 December, while pressuring South Vietnamese President Thieu to accept the agreement. The Paris Peace Accords were signed a month later,

²⁰² Karnow (1997), 546; Oberdorfer (2001), 251; McNamara (1999), 366–7.

²⁰³ John A. Farrell (31 December 2016).

²⁰⁴ FRUS Volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970: Document 8 (24 January 1969), 18-22; Document 46 (Undated), 154-161; Document 49 (28 March 1969), 164-176;

²⁰⁵ FRUS Volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970: Document 106 (6 August 1969), 330-343.

²⁰⁶ FRUS Volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970: Document 117 (10 September 1969), 370-4.

²⁰⁷ Preface, *FRUS*, Vol IX, Vietnam, October 1972 – January 1973, p. iv-vi.

27 January 1973.²⁰⁸ The Accords called for national elections, while allowing the North Vietnamese Army to remain in the South but only receive reinforcements sufficient to replace losses. The U.S. had sixty days to withdraw all forces from South Vietnam. That last article, explained historian Peter Church, “proved... to be the only one of the Paris Agreements which was fully carried out.”²⁰⁹

This short examination of the Vietnam conflict suggests that the war termination problems the United States has experienced in post-9/11 interventions is probably not a new phenomenon. The Johnson administration assumed a decisive victory outcome was possible at low-cost by using graduated pressure to compel North Vietnam to cut off support to the NLF. The costs, however, were insufficiently compelling to force the DRV to capitulate to American demands. The Joint Chiefs were never persuaded of the logic. Instead of recommending the exploration of alternative strategies that met Johnson’s intentions to limit the costs of the war, the uniformed military went all-in for decisive victory. They manipulated McNamara and Johnson into escalating troop levels to the amount they felt was necessary to win, even though they were unable to gain approval for greater actions against North Vietnam. American public opinion turned against the war. The Nixon administration attempted negotiations while withdrawing American forces. Predictably, the North Vietnamese were willing to agree to some concessions to ease the U.S. withdrawal, but not to end the conflict. By 1975, the U.S. Congress slashed funding on military aid to South Vietnam from \$2.8 billion in 1973 to \$300 million. North Vietnamese and NLF forces took Saigon on April 30, 1975.

The United States experienced problems in Vietnam along each of the three hypotheses. Sadly, the United States never critically examined its war termination policies or strategic

²⁰⁸ “The Paris Agreement on Vietnam: Twenty-five Years Later,” Conference Transcript, The Nixon Center, Washington, DC, April 1998. Reproduced on mtholyoke.edu

²⁰⁹ Church, ed. (2006), 193–194.

performance in Vietnam. Post-war criticisms, as discussed above, focused mainly on the tactical and operational decisions and the problems of civil-military relations. The Department of Defense decided to shun counterinsurgency missions, focusing instead on conventional war against the Soviets on the plains of Central Europe. The rebuilding of the American military in the 1980s included vast improvements in integrating the joint services (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines) on the battlefield and an intellectual focus on the operational level of war.²¹⁰ These changes produced a well-trained and integrated military that shocked the world in defeating Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army in just 100 hours during the Gulf War. These innovations, however, did not extend to re-examining the policy and strategy levels of war. Among the key criticisms of the Gulf War outcomes was inattention to war termination.²¹¹

Conclusion

This thesis will use the post 9/11 interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan to examine the salience of the three hypotheses. Each case study is covered in three chapters, one for each hypothesis. Information from U.S. government documents, interviews, official statements, and published memoirs and articles will help determine the extent to which war termination figured in decision-making and how well American strategies addressed the requirements for a favorable and durable outcome. These sources plus journal articles and media reporting will provide insight on cognitive obstacles, political and bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems that may have impeded the ability of both administrations to assess the state of the conflict and make necessary modifications to the strategy. Finally, these sources provide ways to examine

²¹⁰ The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 forced the military services to work together more effectively, increased the power of the Joint Staff, and streamlined the military chain of command [H.R. 3622. October 1, 1986], Gordon and Trainor (1995), xiii-xiv. For a comprehensive view of U.S. Army reforms in the 1980s see Romjue (1997).

²¹¹ Gordon and Trainor (1995), xiv-xv, 463-478;

the bargaining behavior of the United States, the Iraqi and Afghan governments, and the Taliban, and to analyze why favorable outcomes were elusive. The problems addressed in the three hypotheses do not occur in isolation. Imbedded in the second and third chapters of each case are insights on how these problems interacted in unique ways to shape the conflict's trajectory. This complexity is further examined in the concluding chapter, to include a comparison of the two cases and overall implications for U.S. foreign policy and scholarship.

Chapter 3: Pursuit of Decisive Victory in Iraq

The United States ended negotiations with Saddam Hussein over Iraq's suspected Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program and on 20 March 2003 launched Operation Iraqi Freedom.²¹² The Hussein regime fell on 9 April 2003.²¹³ Failing to prepare adequately for the occupation, the United States military and civilian authorities faced an increasingly chaotic situation as the Iraqi military collapse turned into insurgency.²¹⁴ Policies such as de-Baathification and disbanding the Iraqi Army combined with heavy-handed military operations in the Sunni Triangle stoked Sunni Arab fears of marginalization and repression by dominant Shi'a parties.²¹⁵ Senior Iraqi leaders often manipulated unwitting American forces to advance personal and sectarian agendas.²¹⁶ Sunni-Shi'a violence spiraled with the February 2005 bombing of the Shi'a mosque in Samarra.²¹⁷ Senior U.S. officials stayed focused on drawing down U.S. presence and handing over security responsibilities to the fledgling and sectarian Iraqi Security Forces.²¹⁸ Recommendations by junior American officials to reach out to Sunni leaders were rebuffed repeatedly.²¹⁹

This intervention was to replace an existing regime with one more amicable to US interests. Failure to adequately consider war termination resulted in a strategy that fixated on the use of military force, wished away post-Saddam risks, and underappreciated the requirements for a

²¹² Center for American Progress (2004); Bush (29 January 2003).

²¹³ Gordon and Trainor (2006), 390-435.

²¹⁴ For maps of the evolving situation, see "Operation Iraqi Freedom Maps," *GlobalSecurity.org*.

²¹⁵ Pfiffner (2010), 76-85.

²¹⁶ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 36-39; Ricks (2006), 196-200.

²¹⁷ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 195.

²¹⁸ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 267-295.

²¹⁹ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 35-37.

favorable and durable outcome. Returning to the critical factors model outlined in Chapter 2, success hinged upon first, the establishment of a government that earned legitimacy across the political, ethnic, and sectarian spectra; and second, preventing armed resistance from becoming a sustainable insurgency. Decisive victory could have been possible had those two conditions been achieved. However, by 2006 the United States was backing a predatory sectarian Iraqi government that was fighting against a sustainable Sunni Arab insurgency. To make matters worse, Iran-supported Sadrist militias battled coalition forces while participating in the burgeoning civil war.

What Went Wrong?

The existing scholarship is broadly in agreement about why the Iraq war spiraled quickly from an overwhelming military success into a grinding civil war. The Bush Administration failed to deploy enough troops to secure the country after the fall of the regime.²²⁰ Compounding this error was the Department of Defense's failure to plan for so-called Phase IV – post-war reconstruction.²²¹ The administration then stubbornly refused to deploy more troops as the situation grew worse. The United States military, meanwhile, had deliberately unlearned counterinsurgency after Vietnam and employed counterproductive tactics that exacerbated rather than diminished the insurgency.²²² Within this broader explanation, some view Coalition Provisional Authority Chief L. Paul Bremer's de-Baathification and disbanding of the Iraqi

²²⁰ Gordon and Trainor (2012), 15-16; Ricks (2006), 158-166; Dobbins et al (2009); Bensahel et al (2008); PBS Frontline (17 October 2006b); Diamond (2004).

²²¹ Dobbins et al (2009); Bensahel et al (2008), xix; Gordon and Trainor (2006), 503-4; PBS Frontline (17 October 2006b); Diamond (2004).

²²² Ricks (2006); Nagl (2014); Kilcullen (2010); Bolger (2014).

army decisions as key factors that made a bad situation unrecoverable.²²³ A RAND study notes, however, that de-Baathification affected far fewer Iraqis than de-Nazification affected Germans after the second world war and that the Iraqi Army had already disbanded itself.²²⁴ These decisions, moreover, were briefed to the Bush administration and approved by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Ambassador James Dobbins, perhaps the most prominent American scholar and practitioner on post-war reconstruction, largely exonerates the CPA from responsibility for the descent into civil war. After all, he notes, the CPA made exceptional progress along its plan and ranks quite high in comparison to more than 20 other post-conflict missions.²²⁵ The CPA succeeded in areas in which it had the lead. It did not, however, have the lead for security.²²⁶ Dobbins lays principal blame with the Department of Defense for mismanagement. “Experience in these and many other cases,” Dobbins argues, “has dictated a prioritization of postwar tasks: beginning with security, then restoring basic public services, stabilizing the economy, and finally reforming the political system.”²²⁷ Secondly, he criticizes the White House for giving the post-conflict mission to Defense and failing to supervise adequately the planning and execution. “By doing so, the President took himself and his staff out of the daily decision loop.”²²⁸ Had Defense done the appropriate planning, anticipated the scale effort required for

²²³ Pfiffner, 2010; Chandrasekaran (2006), 78-88.

²²⁴ Dobbins et al (2009), xv, xxii-xxiii, xxvi, 52-60, 107-119.

²²⁵ Dobbins et al (2009), xxxviii- xli. See also Dobbins et al (2003); for a less favorable view of the CPA see Chandrasekaran (2006).

²²⁶ Dobbins et al (2009), xiii, 326-333; See also *PBS Frontline* (17 October 2006b), Diamond (2004).

²²⁷ Dobbins et al (2009), xli,

²²⁸ Dobbins et al (2009), xl.

the occupation, and allocated enough forces for security after Saddam's fall, these arguments suggest, the insurgency might have been prevented or countered and defeated.

These issues are important but assume that better planning, additional resources, and more efficient execution would have prevented disaster. Examining the conflict from the war termination framework developed in Chapter 2 illustrates ways to build upon the existing scholarship. The Bush administration assumed decisive military victory, but failed to develop a strategy to gain the most favorable and durable outcome possible at the least cost in blood, treasure, and time. A significant consequence of this assumption was the failure to evaluate the risks of inadequate government legitimacy and a sustainable insurgency. As this chapter will show, having better plans and more American boots-on-the-ground was not sufficient for success. The Bush administration's decisions and U.S. actions in country amplified rather than reduced the key risks in at least three inter-related ways. First, U.S. officials in Washington D.C. and Baghdad failed to identify and take steps to manage the intense and often violent scrimmage for political power. Instead, senior American civilian and military officials super-empowered favored Iraqi elites, who used such backing for narrow personal and political advantage. In many cases, they managed to dupe U.S. officials into enriching their cronies and targeting their rivals. This problem damaged the foundations of legitimacy and gave Sunni Arabs cause to fight. Second, U.S. officials envisioned post-war security and reconstruction as an engineering task: break the problems down into their component parts, arrange them into linear milestones over fixed timelines, and apply the necessary resources to achieve them. American officials did not appreciate how Iraqi elites could manipulate these milestones in ways damaging to government legitimacy. Third, civilian and military efforts worked in silos that were ably exploited by the adaptive Iraqi networks on both pro- and anti-government sides. As the United States focused on the efficient execution of its plans and congratulated itself on achieving bureaucratic milestones, the government was losing legitimacy and the insurgency

was becoming sustainable. The Bush administration and its officials in Baghdad had plenty of detailed plans but no strategy adequate to address the dynamic complexity of the emerging conflict.

Plans without a Strategy

President George W. Bush outlined his core goals in Iraq during a 26 February 2003 speech at the Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C. The United States, by force if necessary, would defend the American people and allies by removing the dual threat posed by Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction and sponsorship of international terrorism.²²⁹ The invasion commenced after the Iraqi leader failed to comply with the U.S. ultimatum. U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld outlined eight supporting objectives:

- end the regime of Saddam Hussein by striking with force on a scope and scale that makes clear to Iraqis that he and his regime are finished.
- to identify, isolate and eventually eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, their delivery systems, production capabilities, and distribution networks,
- search for, capture, drive out terrorists who have found safe harbor in Iraq,
- collect such intelligence as we can find related to terrorist networks in Iraq and beyond.
- collect such intelligence as we can find related to the global network of illicit weapons of mass destruction activity.
- to end sanctions and to immediately deliver humanitarian relief, food and medicine to the displaced and to the many needy Iraqi citizens,
- secure Iraq's oil fields and resources, which belong to the Iraqi people, and which they will need to develop their country after decades of neglect by the Iraqi regime,
- to help the Iraqi people create the conditions for a rapid transition to a representative self-government that is not a threat to its neighbors and is committed to ensuring the territorial integrity of that country.²³⁰

²²⁹ Bush (26 February 2003).

²³⁰ Shanker and Schmitt (March 22, 2003), *Emphasis added*.

Colonel Kevin Benson, the CJ5 (Policy, Plans) for the U.S. Third Army (also known as CFLCC (Combined Forces Land Component Command) and architect of Operation Cobra II (the name of the military campaign), recalled the military objectives as follows:

Destabilize, isolate, and overthrow the Iraqi regime and provide support to a new, broad-based government; destroy Iraqi WMD capability and infrastructure; protect allies and supporters from Iraqi threats and attacks; destroy terrorist networks in Iraq; gather intelligence on global terrorism; detain terrorists and war criminals and free individuals unjustly detained under the Iraqi regime; and support international efforts to set conditions for long-term stability in Iraq and the region.²³¹

War planning had been ongoing well before the public articulation of goals. On November 27, 2001, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld directed General Tommy Franks, the Commander of United States Central Command (CENTCOM), to begin operational planning for the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.²³² Franks was no stranger to military planning for conflict in Iraq and was well versed in the governing contingency operation, code-named 1003-98.²³³ As former Third Army Commander, he would have been responsible for ground operations in the event of war in the Middle East. Franks gave his first brief to Rumsfeld on December 7. Three weeks later, on December 28, Franks delivered his concept to President Bush.²³⁴ The plan for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), later called OPLAN 1003V, envisioned

²³¹ Strategic Studies Institute (2013/4), 120.

²³² Franks (2004), 315.

²³³ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 27.

²³⁴ Franks (2004), 329; Bensahel et al (2008), 6-7.

four major phases: 1) establishing international support and preparing for deployment; 2) shaping the battlespace; 3) major combat operations; and 4) post-combat operations.²³⁵

The concept aimed for decisive victory. Phase III identified two primary goals: “regime forces defeated or capitulated” and “regime leaders dead, apprehended, or marginalized.”²³⁶ Franks and Rumsfeld had a series of meetings with Bush to discuss Phase III.²³⁷ By 5 August 2002 the full campaign plan was briefed to the President. The five-pronged attack included a ground assault from bases in Kuwait and Turkey to defeat Saddam’s fielded forces, Special Operations Forces in Western Iraq to neutralize SCUD missiles, operational fires in and around Baghdad to disrupt command and control and attrite the Republican Guard formations, and psychological operations to erode Iraqi will.²³⁸ Franks continued refining his plan, reducing troop numbers, and comparing force generation models (Generated Start and Running Start).²³⁹ Benson notes that the goals and objectives never changed. The means, however, were under constant revision.²⁴⁰ In the final version, Phase III was to take only 90 days and use a fraction of the forces originally planned.

Phase IV would probably unfold over years, Franks argued, but likely be executed in a peaceful environment. The objectives for Phase IV were “the establishment of a representative form of government, a country capable of defending its territorial borders and maintaining its internal

²³⁵ Bensahel et al (2008), xviii.

²³⁶ Bensahel et al (2008), 7.

²³⁷ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 38-54.

²³⁸ Franks (2004), 366, Bensahel et al (2008), 7. In the event, Turkey would not allow a ground assault from its soil.

²³⁹ “Generated Start” envisioned a large-scale 90-day build-up in Kuwait prior to invasion. “Running Start” envisioned a force-flow into Kuwait during an ongoing air campaign, with the ground invasion to commence about 25 days after the airstrikes began. In the event, ground forces built up in advance of the war. Air and ground operations would commence simultaneously on 19 March 2003. Gordon & Trainor (2006), 48-51, 551.

²⁴⁰ Strategic Studies Institute (2013-14), 120.

security, without any weapons of mass destruction.”²⁴¹ The plan envisaged that forces would continue to flow into Iraq, until roughly 250,000 were supporting the occupation.²⁴² Franks was adamant that security and “civic action” were inextricably linked – a nod to the importance of Phase IV.²⁴³ The plan assumed that the Iraqi military would remain relatively intact and be available to provide stability and support to reconstruction efforts.²⁴⁴ Iraqi leaders, meanwhile, would work together with U.S. and international officials to establish a new government. This model, he believed, had worked recently in Afghanistan and could succeed in Iraq.²⁴⁵

U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair tried to shape U.S. decision-making regarding the decision to go to war. He aimed to convince Bush on the need for the inspectors to have sufficient time do their jobs investigating whether Saddam Hussein was fully compliant with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441.²⁴⁶ The Chilcot report details the points Blair made to Bush during their 31 January 2003 meeting.²⁴⁷ Blair wanted time to build public support in the U.K. and argued that a broad international coalition should be assembled to add legitimacy if war became necessary. He was aware of Bush’s views that military victory would be easily achieved. The report shows no evidence that Blair challenged this view or raised the question of war termination.²⁴⁸ French President Jacques Chirac told Blair that France opposed going to war in

²⁴¹ Franks (2004), 351.

²⁴² Franks (2004), 366, Bensahel et al (2008), 8. These would include forces in theater but not on the ground in Iraq.

²⁴³ Franks (2004), 422, 424.

²⁴⁴ Franks (2004), 366, 419; Bensahel et al (2008), 9.

²⁴⁵ Franks (2004), 419. Dobbins et al (2009), xli.

²⁴⁶ UNSCR 1441 demanded that Hussein disarm alleged stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles.

²⁴⁷ Chilcot Report, Section 3.6, 135-8.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 135-8, 165; Section 6.1, 175; Section 6.5

Iraq, unless Saddam Hussein did something unacceptable. U.K. Foreign Minister Jack Straw told Dominique de Villepin on 29 January 2003 that it was in neither country's interest for the United States to act unilaterally. "That would mean the international community losing influence over US actions."²⁴⁹ The U.K.'s Joint Intelligence Council assessed that the Iraqi people would acquiesce in Coalition military action to topple the regime, as long as civilian casualties are limited."²⁵⁰ Blair did consistently raise to Bush the importance of post-war planning but was reportedly assured by the latter that such planning was progressing well.²⁵¹ The documents contained in the Chilcot Report suggest that the U.K.'s concerns about the prospects of post-Saddam instability did not become deal-breakers in their willingness to support the invasion. Instead, the U.K. seemed to focus on getting their portion of the reconstruction effort right.²⁵²

Phase III captured the attention of the Department of Defense and the United States government. CENTCOM Commander General Tommy Franks recalls, "While we at CENTCOM were executing the war plan, Washington should focus on policy-level issues . . . I knew the President and Don Rumsfeld would back me up, so I felt free to pass the message along to the bureaucracy beneath them: You pay attention to the day after and I'll pay attention to the day of."²⁵³ A RAND study that examined planning for post-Saddam Iraq argues that Franks' mindset "reinforced an understandable tendency at CENTCOM to focus planning on major combat as an end in itself rather than as a component part of a broader effort to create a

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 140-1.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 147-8.

²⁵¹ Ibid. Section 6.4 and Section 6.5, 333-338.

²⁵² Ibid, Section 6.5, 360-407.

²⁵³ Franks (2004), 441. Emphasis in the original.

stable, reasonably democratic Iraq. The result, arguably, was a military operation that made the latter, larger goal more difficult to achieve.”²⁵⁴

As part of the normal military planning process, Franks and his staff, as well his subordinate commands, would conduct myriad war-games and rehearsals. Such efforts are designed to test the feasibility of the military campaign against a competitive and uncooperative enemy. They would expose flaws or identify major contingencies to be addressed. If necessary, the military adds “branches” (deviations from the base plan to address key risks and opportunities) and “sequels” (follow-on efforts) to the operation.²⁵⁵ In November 2002, the Third Army conducted an exercise called Lucky Warrior that exposed some problems in the CENTCOM plan. Lieutenant General David McKiernan, the commander, was not impressed by the likelihood of an early regime collapse and believed that he would likely need to fight his way to Baghdad. He was concerned about the small size of the invasion force and the efficacy of the Running Start force generation concept. He outlined his concerns to Franks and drew up an alternative concept called Cobra II.²⁵⁶

As the invasion grew closer, CENTCOM commenced a “Rock Drill” on December 7-8, 2002, to rehearse the campaign with the subordinate commands.²⁵⁷ The rehearsal would set conditions for Internal Look, which was to take place a few days later. Internal Look was a fully computerized war-game designed to test the plan and command and control systems against an adversary playing Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi military.²⁵⁸ It identified issues like

²⁵⁴ Bensahel et al (2008), xix.

²⁵⁵ For more detail on the military planning process, see U.S. Department of Defense (2011), IV – 27-36.

²⁵⁶ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 82-84.

²⁵⁷ A “Rock Drill” is simply a rehearsal, often using a model of the area of operations and icons representing friendly and enemy forces, in which commanders brief their actions in support of the campaign.

²⁵⁸ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 87-94.

the ones McKiernan flagged earlier. This opened the opportunity for McKiernan to brief Rumsfeld on Cobra II. The Secretary approved Cobra II at the end of December, but would retain tight control over troop levels.²⁵⁹ The military commands continued rehearsing and refining the plans until the start of the war. Senators Joseph Biden and Chuck Hagel, who were on a fact-finding trip to the region, visited the Internal Look. Biden noted his concerns about the lack of clarity on the post-war plan. “Phase IV worries America,” he reportedly told the participants.²⁶⁰

Phase IV, however, received only a fraction of Pentagon attention. No analog of the deliberate planning and preparation process occurred for post-combat operations.²⁶¹ “The majority of activities required for Phase IV were perceived by the Department of Defense to be the responsibility of civilian agencies and departments,” summarized a RAND report.²⁶² Phase IV rehearsals and war-games would have required participation by other Departments and agencies within the U.S. Government, and perhaps some international and non-governmental organizations. Nonetheless, RAND notes that “military planners believed such collaboration would not be necessary for stability, reconstruction, and transition activities to succeed.”²⁶³ Defense even neglected to assess the troop levels needed. As Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz explained to Congress, it was “hard to conceive that it would take more forces

²⁵⁹ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 93-94.

²⁶⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 92.

²⁶¹ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 138-163; The Joint Staff conducted its own war-game in the fall of 2002, Prominent Hammer II, which highlighted the need for a military headquarters for Phase IV (p. 140).

²⁶² Bensahel et al (2008), 15.

²⁶³ Bensahel et al (2008), 15.

to provide stability in a post-Saddam Iraq than it would take to conduct the war itself and to secure the surrender of Saddam's security forces and his army—hard to imagine.”²⁶⁴

The U.S. government never articulated a clear theory of success for the war, but it is possible to piece one together.²⁶⁵ The presumed theory of success was that the military would defeat the Iraqi military forces and depose Saddam Hussein. The vanquished Iraqi military would remain intact, and, with local police, would support the security and stability of Iraq backed-up by remaining international military forces. International civilian efforts would support Iraqi exiles and internal non-Baathist leaders in establishing a new democratic government that would become a partner in the war on terror. Reconstruction assistance would allow the Iraqi economy to recover. Iraq's oil wealth would enable the country to become self-sustainable. International efforts would be taken over by Iraqis as quickly as possible, permitting U.S. and international civilians and military to withdraw. The exit strategy, Franks emphasized to Bush, must be based on effective Iraqi governance, not a fixed timeline.²⁶⁶

The campaign plan relied upon three critical but implicit assumptions.²⁶⁷ First, that the Iraqi military and police would remain intact and be willing and able to provide security with limited assistance from international forces.²⁶⁸ Second, that the Sunni Arabs would accept a far more

²⁶⁴ Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul D. Wolfowitz testimony to House Budget Committee, 27 February 2003.

²⁶⁵ The U.S. government did outline a series of unclassified bullet points capturing the essence of the strategy, but without the ends – ways – means discipline. The bullets points call for the coordinated use of all instruments of U.S. national power; work with Iraqis opposed to the regime that share U.S. vision; establish an interim administration that transitions to an elected government as soon as practicable. The Rumsfeld Papers (29 October 2002).

²⁶⁶ Franks (2004), 392-3.

²⁶⁷ The U.S. Department of Defense defines a planning assumption as “a supposition on the current situation or a presupposition on the future course of events, either or both assumed to be true in the absence of positive proof, necessary to enable the commander in the process of planning to complete an estimate of the situation and make a decision on the course of action.” JP 1-02 (2016), 17.

²⁶⁸ Franks (2004), 366; Bensahel et al (2008), xx; Wolfowitz (2003). Lieutenant General William Scott Wallace, the ground force commander recalled, “But what in fact happened, which was unanticipated at least in [my

limited share of power, acquiesce in the new government, and not fight back.²⁶⁹ Third, and most importantly, that a political leadership based mostly around former exiled elites could quickly earn the legitimacy to rule Iraq.²⁷⁰ All three would have to be true for the U.S. plan to succeed. All three turned out to be terribly wrong, and the United States had no strategy to address them.

General Franks relied on the Afghanistan example – an *availability heuristic* – to justify his belief that Phase IV would be relatively peaceful and focused on achieving political and economic milestones.²⁷¹ This begs two key questions: did Rumsfeld and Franks have reason to believe the Afghanistan experience was largely representative of other post-conflict situations, and, if not, did they have reason to believe that the Afghanistan and Iraq situations shared unique characteristics amenable to low-footprint, short duration approaches?

For the first question, the Pentagon and the Bush Administration had the benefit of four recent examples: Somalia (1992-1994), Haiti (1994-1996), Bosnia (1995-present), and Kosovo (1999-present). Peacekeeping missions were a lightning rod with the new Bush Administration. They believed that the U.S. military was too valuable to be wasted on such missions that other militaries could do perfectly well.²⁷² Rumsfeld and other military senior leaders favored small

mind], is that when [we] decapitated the regime, everything below it fell apart.” *PBS Frontline* (26 February 2004b).

²⁶⁹ Three days before the war, Vice President Richard Cheney clearly articulated this view by stating, “My belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.” *Meet the Press*, March 16, 2003. Brinkley and Schmitt (30 November 2003). Gordon & Trainor (2012), 9-11.

²⁷⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 9-11.

²⁷¹ Franks (2004), 419. See also Woodward (2006), 111-131.

²⁷² *Commission on Presidential Debates* (11 October 2000); *The Washington Times* (2 December 2001); PBS Frontline (23 July 2004); Goldberg (23 October 2000).

footprint, short duration post-conflict missions that could be handed off quickly to local or other international forces.²⁷³

A 2003 RAND study led by Ambassador James Dobbins examined force levels associated with other U.S. nation-building efforts.²⁷⁴ This study emerged from a conference in May 2003, so would not have been available to Rumsfeld, Franks, and their staffs during the invasion planning. The information, however, was readily accessible. Bosnia and Kosovo, both relatively successful peacekeeping missions, had force to population ratios of 18.6 and 20 soldiers per 1000 people, respectively. In other successful examples, force ratios of roughly 20 per one thousand were used by the British in Malaya and Northern Ireland.²⁷⁵ These were large footprint, long duration missions not favored by Rumsfeld. For an Iraqi population of roughly 26 million people, 20 per 1000 ratio amounted to 520,000 troops.

How did small footprint, short duration missions fare? Not well is the short answer. Somalia had 5 peacekeepers per 1000 inhabitants. Started in 1992, the mission ended in failure three years later.²⁷⁶ Similarly, Haiti had 3.5 American troops per 1000 inhabitants. The United States managed to restore the elected leadership but left before durable political institutions could form. The country has been politically unstable ever since.²⁷⁷

The force to population ratio in Afghanistan, perceived to be going successfully as of 2003, was 5 per 1000 in Kabul (mostly non-U.S. forces), but only 0.46 countrywide.²⁷⁸ Iraq was to

²⁷³ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 503-504; Rumsfeld (25 September 2003).

²⁷⁴ James Dobbins et al (2003)

²⁷⁵ Quinlivan (1995), 59–69

²⁷⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Somalia 1992-3*.

²⁷⁷ Dubois (2012); Katz (2013).

²⁷⁸ Bensahel et al (2008), 17.

have 6.6 ratio overall with 2.4 per 1000 in Baghdad. U.S. Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki was famously chastised by Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz for expressing his estimate that 400,000 troops would be required for stability operations in Iraq.²⁷⁹ In Shinseki's defense, the examples with roughly 20:1000 ratios were consistently successful. The low ratio examples, Somalia and Haiti, showed poor results. In short, plenty of empirical evidence suggested that low footprint, short duration post conflict missions experienced significant problems and far lower rates of success than large footprint, long duration missions. As to the validity of Afghanistan as a successful template, troubles were brewing there (as will be seen in Chapter 6) that should have raised doubts that powerful Iraqi elites would set aside deep-seated rivalries and personal aspirations to work together harmoniously.

The actual invasion force for Operation Iraqi Freedom totaled just over 200,000 troops, with roughly 140,000 on the ground in Iraq by April 2003.²⁸⁰ The RAND study about Phase IV planning notes a CENTCOM and Third Army belief that follow-on forces would continue to flow into Iraq, based on the 1003V projection of a 250,000-troop requirement.²⁸¹ Whether Rumsfeld approved that force number or Franks believed such a force was necessary is doubtful. Franks, in fact, canceled the deployment of 1st Cavalry Division as U.S. forces entered Baghdad.²⁸²

Perhaps Rumsfeld and Franks had other reasons to believe that Iraq would be fundamentally different than Somalia and Haiti. After all, like Afghanistan and unlike the other two examples, the Iraqi forces were to be defeated militarily, the regime overthrown, and a combination of

²⁷⁹ *PBS Frontline* (26 February 2004a).

²⁸⁰ *The New York Times* (22 June 2011); BBC (14 December 2011).

²⁸¹ Bensahel et al (2008), 9; Franks (2004), 366.

²⁸² See Bensahel et al (2008), 8, note 11.

exiles and internal opposition figures were to form a new government. Should they have had any reason to doubt their prospects for success? In June 1999, then CENTCOM Commander Anthony Zinni conducted a classified exercise called Desert Crossing to examine potential courses of action if the Saddam Hussein regime collapsed and CENTCOM was directed to occupy and stabilize the country. The experts compared two approaches: “inside-out” envisioned an internal group of Iraqis seizing power. “Outside-in” imagined a U.S.-imposed administration. The exercise determined that issues such as internal looting, sectarian strife, regional interference, and violent struggles for power were likely. “A change in regime does not guarantee stability,” noted the after-action report.²⁸³ As war with Iraq became likely by 2002, Zinni attempted to meet with Franks and discuss the potential challenges of dealing with a failed state. The Pentagon reportedly blocked the trip. The Bush Administration never studied Desert Crossing.²⁸⁴

During the lead-up to the Iraq war, the State Department developed the Future of Iraq project, which would identify many of the post invasion problems the United States encountered.²⁸⁵ The effort had no authority to develop a postwar plan.²⁸⁶ It consisted of 17 working groups that amassed over 2,000 pages of paper organized into 13 volumes.²⁸⁷ It was more appropriately organized as a process that got Iraqi exiles, various American officials, and representatives from international and non-government organizations to discuss the future of the country.²⁸⁸

²⁸³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 6-8.

²⁸⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 9.

²⁸⁵ Bensahel et al (2008), 31-33.

²⁸⁶ Bensahel et al (2008), 33.

²⁸⁷ *The National Security Archive*, “New State Department Releases on the ‘Future of Iraq’ Project”; PBS Frontline, “Turf Wars”; Bensahel et al (2008), 29-33.

²⁸⁸ Bensahel et al (2008), 32.

Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith reportedly dismissed the project as a “bunch of concept papers.”²⁸⁹ It was ignored by the Pentagon due to bureaucratic turf-battles and interagency suspicion that State was not on board with the war.²⁹⁰

Warnings about the potential for post-conflict violence surfaced from a wide variety of sources. Early in the planning Rumsfeld identified a 29-point “Parade of Horribles” that were risks to success with the military operation.²⁹¹ Most of these concerned weapons of mass destruction and international reactions. Only one identified the likelihood of ethnic or sectarian strife. None mentioned the legitimacy of an interim Iraqi government. Other agencies pointed out the risks of post-invasion instability. The National Intelligence Council issued a January 2003 report that forewarned, “a post-Saddam authority would face a deeply divided society with a significant chance that domestic groups would engage in violent conflict with each other unless an occupying force prevented them from doing so.... Score-settling,” it noted, “would occur throughout Iraq.”²⁹² A persistent debate within the Bush Administration centered on whether “internals” (Iraqis from Iraq) or “externals” (Iraqi expatriates) should lead the interim Iraqi government.²⁹³ The Office of the Secretary of Defense preferred externals because they could be pre-vetted. This would enable the interim government to stand up more quickly and

²⁸⁹ Jeffrey Goldberg (9 May 2005).

²⁹⁰ *PBS Frontline*, “Turf Wars”; Bensahel et al (2008), xx, 31. DoD, in fact, reportedly blocked the effort’s leader Tom Warrick, from becoming ORHA Chief Jay Garner’s Deputy (xx).

²⁹¹ Many of the “Horribles” focused on weapons of mass destruction and international reactions. Only one identified the likelihood of ethnic or sectarian strife. None mentioned governance or the legitimacy of an interim Iraqi government. *The Rumsfeld Papers*, “A Parade of Horribles,” 15 October 2002.

²⁹² Reported in Gordon & Trainor (2006), 468, 570-1. For an excerpt from the report, see “A Long, Difficult, and Probably Turbulent Process,” *New York Times*, 20 October 2004.

²⁹³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 9-10.

speed the pace of transition and withdrawal. State and the Central Intelligence Agency, however, worried that externals would have no domestic legitimacy.²⁹⁴

Brent Scowcroft, former National Security Advisor to Presidents Gerald R. Ford and George H.W. Bush, was so troubled by the notion of war with Iraq that he penned an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal. “An attack on Iraq at this time would seriously jeopardize, if not destroy, the global counterterrorist campaign we have undertaken.” Moreover, he wrote, “if we are to achieve our strategic objectives in Iraq, a military campaign very likely would have to be followed by a large-scale, long-term military occupation.”²⁹⁵ Iraqi exiles also offered cautionary notes. “On many occasions, I told the Americans that from the very moment the regime fell, if an alternative government was not ready there would be a power vacuum and there would be chaos and looting,” claimed Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and a longtime ally of the United States, “Given our history, it is very obvious this would occur.”²⁹⁶

After Internal Look in December 2002, barely four months before the invasion, the Joint Staff directed US Joint Forces Command to create Task Force IV to work on phase IV planning. The task force began to assemble in January 2003, however the effort was disbanded in March 2003, and supplanted by the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) led by Retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner.²⁹⁷ ORHA was created under the authority of NSPD-24 on January 20, 2002, scarcely two months before the invasion. NSPD-24 gave Defense the responsibility for post-war planning and directed the formation of an office to

²⁹⁴ Bensahel et al (2008), 27; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 9-11.

²⁹⁵ Scowcroft (15 August 2002).

²⁹⁶ Brinkley & Schmitt 2003.

²⁹⁷ Bensahel et al (2008), xxi-xxiii. For Task Force IV, see also 41-51. For ORHA, see 53-72.

execute it. OHRA planning focused mainly on potential humanitarian crises – most of which never materialized. “The problem,” RAND’s Nora Bensahel summarizes, “was not that no one in the U.S. government thought about the challenges of post-Saddam Iraq. Rather, it was the failure to coordinate and integrate these various thoughts into a coherent, actionable plan.”²⁹⁸

Static Milestones Face Dynamic Interaction

OHRA arrived in Iraq on April 21, 2002. Three days later, Rumsfeld informed Garner that Ambassador L. Paul Bremer would be coming to Iraq as the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The Bush Administration had not settled in advance on whether to turn administration over to Iraqis immediately or to govern as an occupying authority and transition more slowly to Iraqi control.²⁹⁹ There is no indication that the options were thoroughly debated, but the Administration seems to have aimed for a rapid hand-off to Iraqi authorities. “The President’s goal,” Rumsfeld recorded in a 14 October memo to himself, “is to stabilize Iraq and then turn it over to the Iraqis.”³⁰⁰ Indeed this is what the military believed was the Administration’s intention and was the advice of empowered exiles such as Chalabi.³⁰¹ As the Saddam regime disintegrated and Iraqi exiles began to bicker, the Administration changed course.³⁰² The CPA would govern Iraq under United Nations authority with the support of an Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) until handing over to an Iraqi Government.³⁰³ Bremer arrived

²⁹⁸ Bensahel et al (2008), xix-xx.

²⁹⁹ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 478-9.

³⁰⁰ *The Rumsfeld Papers* (14 October 2003), “President’s Goal.”

³⁰¹ Chandrasekaran (27 April 2003); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 27-32.

³⁰² Gordon & Trainor (2006), 478-479.

³⁰³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 30; Bensahel et al (2008), xiii-xiv; 106-107

in Baghdad on 12 May to begin forming the CPA. He made two key decisions that would heighten the risk to success: de-Baathification and disbanding the Iraqi Army.

Bremer issued CPA Order Number 1, known as de-Baathification, on May 16, 2003. It was his first official act. Since Sunnis held most of the power in the Baath party, the order disproportionately affected that community and its leaders.³⁰⁴ Later that day, Bremer informed Iraqi exiles and elites of the decision to delay transfer of authority to Iraqi officials.³⁰⁵ Hamid Bayati, from the Shi'a party SCIRI (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution on Iraq), reportedly warned CPA leaders, "the longer Iraqis are not in control of their political life, the more problems would arise." Chalabi and others registered concerns about a U.S. broken promise to turn over power to Iraqis within weeks.³⁰⁶ Bremer nonetheless appointed the twenty-five member Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), consisting of 13 exiles and 12 local Iraqis.³⁰⁷ Twelve of the 25 were Shi'a, and five were Kurds. Five Sunni Arabs were included in the body (20%), three of whom were local.³⁰⁸ Most Iraqis were reportedly unfamiliar with the IGC and its members.³⁰⁹

Perhaps to ameliorate their anger over the delay in transferring power, Bremer gave the IGC the responsibility for implementing de-Baathification. This decision gave those wanting to consolidate their own power a very potent tool to eliminate the competition. The IGC wasted no time in pressing for expansion of the program while preventing former Baathists who had

³⁰⁴ Dobbins et al (2009), 114-118.

³⁰⁵ Scott Wilson (22 May 2003); Bensahel et al (2008), xxii – xxiii, 53-72.

³⁰⁶ Chandrasekaran (3 June 2003); Dobbins et al (2009), 268.

³⁰⁷ Chandrasekaran (2 June 2003).

³⁰⁸ Bensahel et al (2008), 167. Sunni Arabs make up roughly twenty percent of the Iraqi population.

³⁰⁹ Dan Murphy (29 October 2003).

committed no crimes from returning to government.³¹⁰ Ahmed Chalabi, for instance, used these aggressive de-Baathification authorities to undercut support for his political rival Ayad Alawi – a secular Shi’a who aimed for greater Sunni inclusion.³¹¹

The decision to disband the Army, CPA Order Number 2, was issued on 23 May 2003. Since Saddam’s Army was led mostly by Sunni Arabs, the order had a disproportionate effect on Sunni leaders and risked alienating some 385,000 armed and trained men.³¹² It prompted angry reactions.³¹³ Demonstrations occurred for weeks in Baghdad. Violent protests in Mosul, where Major General David Petraeus was trying to gain local support, wounded sixteen American soldiers. One senior military officer noted that “the insurgency went crazy ... One Iraqi who saved my life in an ambush said to me, ‘I can’t be your friend anymore’.”³¹⁴ On June 18, an estimated 2000 former Iraqi soldiers protested outside the Green Zone. “We will not let the Americans rule us in such a humiliating way,” declared one speaker.³¹⁵ American soldiers reportedly fired into the crowd, killing two.³¹⁶

To make problems worse, the military plan relied on the vanquished Iraqi Army to provide manpower for security and reconstruction assistance.³¹⁷ Disbanding the Army meant there was no local Iraqi force and far too few international soldiers to fill the security vacuum. Chaos and

³¹⁰ Dobbins et al (2009), xxvii. Dobbins notes that Bremer restrained more aggressive de-Baathification measures proposed by the IGC. Ricks (2006), 154-5.

³¹¹ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 476; Chandrasekaran (27 April 2003)

³¹² Ricks (2006), 162.

³¹³ Filkins and Fisher (3 May 2003); Andrews and Tyler (7 June 2003).

³¹⁴ Ricks (2006), 164.

³¹⁵ Ricks (2006), 164.

³¹⁶ *Agency France Presse* (18 June 2003).

³¹⁷ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 484.

looting were rampant in Iraqi cities. Meanwhile, efforts by U.S. military and intelligence officials to reach out to Sunni military leaders were disapproved at senior levels in the military command and CPA. One Sunni leader reportedly told his American counterpart, “All right my friend, this is the last time we will speak, and I wish you luck in the hard times to come.”³¹⁸

The CPA’s first two official orders, de-Baathification and disbanding the Army set important conditions for Sunni Arab resistance.³¹⁹ Dobbins notes that de-Baathification and the order to disband the Iraqi Army – both orders which were cleared by the Department of Defense and White House – could have benefitted from further review. But he downplays their significance. After all, de-Baathification was only intended to affect 0.1 percent of the Iraqi population – 25 times less than the de-Nazification policy in post-war Germany.³²⁰ The Iraqi Army had already dissolved itself, he argues, so there was little reason to issue the order. Bremer instead could have put them on an inactive status, sustained their pay, and recalled individuals and units selectively.³²¹ These orders did, as Dobbins observes, antagonize the Sunni community from which the insurgency grew.³²² As the first two administrative acts by the occupation authority de-Baathification and disbanding the Army sent a clear statement, whether intended or not, about who was welcome and who was not. Each order taken individually might not have been as problematic as some critics suggest, but together with other actions they suggest that locally respected Sunni leaders had no place in the new order.³²³ *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius recalls, “I remember one prominent U.S. National Security Council official telling me

³¹⁸ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 26.

³¹⁹ See Bremer (2006) 23-49.

³²⁰ Dobbins et al (2009), xxxvi-xxxvii.

³²¹ Dobbins et al (2009), xxiii-xxv.

³²² Dobbins et al (2009), xxvi.

³²³ Diamond (2004).

more than once that the answer for Iraq was the ‘80-percent solution’—in other words, Kurds and Shiites would build the new state regardless of opposition from the 20 percent of the population that was Sunni. This view was recklessness dressed up as *realpolitik*.³²⁴ “The resistance developed,” reflected a Sunni Arab political leader, “once it became clear to the Sunni community that they were being excluded from the political process.”³²⁵

Military actions fed the political resentment. In April 2003 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division in Fallujah fired into a protesting crowd after allegedly taking fire from some militants, killing seventeen and wounding more than seventy.³²⁶ That unit was soon replaced by a Brigade of the Third Infantry Division (3rd ID). Concerned that the 82nd Airborne was going to return to the area, the 3rd ID command offered to extend his unit in in Fallujah. CJTF-7 Commander Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez denied the request, and the 82nd Airborne returned to the restive city. Within weeks they reportedly shot and killed some of the local policemen trained by 3rd ID after mistaking them for insurgents.³²⁷ Similar problems were occurring in the area around Tikrit, another part of the Sunni triangle. The 4th Infantry Division was using tactics like the ones seen in Anbar: large scale sweeps, liberal use of firepower in populated areas, frequent and indiscriminate night raids that hauled in high volumes of detainees, many of whom were innocent, who then languished in overcrowded detention

³²⁴ Ignatius (1 November 2015)

³²⁵ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable 5 December 2005.

³²⁶ Human Rights Watch (16 June 2003)

³²⁷ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 491-492.

facilities for weeks.³²⁸ Insurgent attacks increased nearly four-fold countrywide from roughly fifteen per day in June 2003 to sixty by November.³²⁹

These orders and military actions took place as a new communications revolution was getting underway. Without the benefit of mobile phones and digital technology information traveled slower in previous postwar environments. Individuals and groups had fewer opportunities to share ideas and communicate problems. Officials had more reaction time. In Afghanistan, civil war followed by years of Taliban misrule left a devastated infrastructure. A few elites had satellite phones. The broader population relied on radio and word of mouth. Iraq 2003 was vastly different. Mobile phones and internet were far more diffused, allowing rapid and frequent interconnections among families, leaders, and social networks. Outrage echoed across aggrieved Sunni Arab communities, amplifying indignation into resistance at a pace that far exceeded the ability of U.S. official to understand and react effectively. The prime beneficiary was a Jordanian named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his group, al Qaeda in Iraq.³³⁰

In addition to Sunni insurgent and terrorist groups, Muqtada al-Sadr's Iran-backed Shi'a militia, Jaish al Mahdi (Mahdi Army), began agitating in Baghdad and Najaf.³³¹ Sadr was challenging Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the senior Shi'a cleric in Iraq, for influence and took the competition into the streets. His militia was accused of murdering Ayatollah Abd al-Majid al-Khoei in April 2003. They also began a series of sectarian murders designed to purge Sunni

³²⁸ Ricks (2006), 232-240, 258-261; International Committee of the Red Cross Resource Centre (8 May 2004); Cloud, Robbins and Jaffe (7 May 2004)

³²⁹ Dobbins et al (2009), 93.

³³⁰ McChrystal et al (2015), 2, 24, 27; McChrystal (2013), 107-8, 119-122.

³³¹ Dobbins et al (2009), 298-301.

Arabs from areas of Baghdad.³³² This led to a serious debate between the CPA who wanted Sadr arrested and CJTF-7, the Pentagon, and the CIA who did not.³³³ The U.S. decided not to arrest him. Sadr continued operating with a degree of impunity, taking over the Samir Hotel in Najaf on October 15, 2003, and naming it his Ministry of Defense.³³⁴

Despite the start-up challenges and increasingly difficult security situation, the CPA did manage to put together an actionable plan soon after Bremer's arrival in Baghdad. By July 2003 Bremer had issued a vision and set of milestones for Iraq. The goal was to achieve:

A durable peace for a unified and stable, democratic Iraq that provides effective and representative government for the Iraqi people; is underpinned by new and protected freedoms and a growing market economy; is able to defend itself but no longer poses a threat to its neighbors or international security.³³⁵

The vision would be realized by focusing on four core foundations: security, governance, economy, and essential services. The CPA later added strategic communications to this list.³³⁶ The plan listed benchmarks and timelines for each foundation.³³⁷ The ones for security, economy, and essential services were concrete. The governance timelines were less precisely organized into short, medium, and long term.³³⁸

³³² Dobbins et al (2009), 298; *The Rumsfeld Papers*, Info Memo from Hume Horan to the Administrator, "Subject: Muqtada al-Sadr's Published threats," July 31, 2003; memo from Secretary Rumsfeld to L. Paul Bremer, III, "Re: CPA Issues," August 4, 2003.

³³³ Dobbins et al (2009), 301-307.

³³⁴ Dobbins et al (2009), 301

³³⁵ Coalition Provisional Authority (11 July 2003).

³³⁶ Coalition Provisional Authority (18 July 2003), 1.

³³⁷ Coalition Provisional Authority (11 July 2003).

³³⁸ Dobbins et al (2009), 266-7.

Meanwhile, key Shi'a and Kurdish leaders were working the CPA process to press their advantage. A re-distribution of power among the major groups in Iraq toward proportional representation was bound to work against the Sunnis, but did not have to alienate them so aggressively. The ICG selected a twenty-five-member cabinet, with only three positions going to Sunni Arabs (plus an Interior Minister from April to June 2004).³³⁹ Their appointed status did not sit well with key Iraqi leaders. Sistani issued a fatwa on June 28, 2003, calling for a new constitution to be written by a group that was elected by the Iraqi people.³⁴⁰ Sistani and other Iraqi leaders (including some Sunnis) would persist in their demands for elections to be held as soon as possible.³⁴¹ With the Sunni political community fragmented and many leaders joining the insurgency, elections would heavily favor organized Shi'a political parties and movements.³⁴² To press their advantage, Shi'a leaders in the ICG called for more expansive de-Baathification.³⁴³ Militants registered their protests by targeting ICG members as well as international forces.³⁴⁴ Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's network Tawhid wal-Jihad (the precursor to al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)) bombed the United Nations compound on August 19, 2003, killing Special Envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello and prompting the UN to pull out of the country.³⁴⁵

³³⁹ Filkins (2 September 2003). One position, Minister of Information, remained unfilled. By contrast 14 of 24 members were Shi'a and 4 were Kurds.

³⁴⁰ Chandrasekaran (26 November 2003).

³⁴¹ Sipress (6 January 2004). For the IGC vote, see Brinkley (1 December 2003).

³⁴² Dobbins et al (2009), 269-270.

³⁴³ Dobbins et al (2009), 114-119.

³⁴⁴ Dreazen (10 December 2003); Jehl (13 November 2003); Zoroya (21 October 2003); Scott Wilson (18 May 2004).

³⁴⁵ Filkins and Oppel, Jr. (20 August 2003).

Some ICG leaders advocated the use of militias such as Peshmerga and the Badr Corps to help stem the violence, but were rebuffed by the CPA.³⁴⁶

Internationally, the efforts to gain international legitimacy were running into problems. The Arab League announced in July 2003 that it would not recognize the ICG.³⁴⁷ They relented after heavy lobbying by the Bush Administration and the United Nations.³⁴⁸ On September 23, 2003, the ICG banned the Qatar-based *Al Jazeera* news station along with *Al Arabiya*, the Saudi-owned, Dubai-based station, on suspicion of encouraging violence and provoking sectarian strife.³⁴⁹ Both are stations sponsored by Sunni Arab states.

Bremer refined his plan. In an 8 September 2003 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, reportedly without clearance from the Pentagon, he outlined his seven-step plan to Iraqi sovereignty. These steps included 1) creation of a broadly representative Iraqi Governing Council, 2) ICG to name a constitutional preparatory committee (CPC) to develop a way forward in developing a new Iraqi Constitution, 3) appointment by the IGC of 25 ministers to run the Iraqi government, 4) writing a new Iraqi constitution, 5) popular ratification of the constitution, 6) election of a new government, 7) dissolving the CPA.³⁵⁰ The CPA recognized the need for a detailed plan and came up with one within weeks. The CPA estimated this seven-step process would require 540 days to complete.³⁵¹ Leaders in Washington and Iraq were reportedly stunned.

³⁴⁶ Patrick E. Tyler (19 September 2003); Berenson (6 November 2003).

³⁴⁷ Hurst (31 July 2003).

³⁴⁸ *New York Times* (September 9, 2003); Daniszewski and Zayan (10 September 2003); Bruce Stanley (17 September 2003).

³⁴⁹ Chandrasekaran (24 September, 2003).

³⁵⁰ Bremer (8 September 2003). See also *PBS Frontline*, “Bremer’s Seven-Step Plan for Iraqi Sovereignty,”

³⁵¹ Gordon and Trainor (2012), 14-15; Dobbins et al (2009), xxxv.

The Bush Administration and the Pentagon were aiming for a near-term handover to Iraqi authorities. Bremer's plan would take far longer than the Administration desired. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice grew increasingly concerned and asked Robert Blackwill, a former Ambassador to India, to assess the situation. Blackwill characterized Bremer's plan as unrealistic, schoolbook, and done without Iraqi support.³⁵² The plan, which included an appointed constitutional assembly, was issued three months after Sistani's fatwa calling for the body to be elected. This agitated the IGC and key Shi'a leaders.³⁵³ Ultimately, a compromise was reached in which the Americans would hand over authority to an Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) in mid-2004 with Iyad Allawi as Prime Minister. National elections would be held six months later in January 2005.³⁵⁴

While the Shi'a dominated IGC showed little interest in winning over Sunni Arab support, U.S. actions continued exacerbating the latter's sense of alienation. Derek Harvey, the chief intelligence analyst for the military command in Iraq, wrote a classified assessment in February 2004 of the burgeoning insurgency called "Sunni Arab Resistance: Politics of the Gun."³⁵⁵ The report detailed how Saddam Hussein had expanded the Special Republican Guards, *Fedayeen Saddam*, Iraqi Intelligence, and Baath Party militia as a hedge against internal rebellion. These forces had placed arms caches and explosive materials in safe houses throughout the country. Harvey estimated 65,000 to 95,000 of these men, a ready-made insurgent cadre, went to ground in and around Baghdad after the fall of the regime. Saddam also built special relationships with

³⁵² PBS Frontline, "Interview with Robert Blackwill."

³⁵³ Dobbins et al (2009), 269-271; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 26-27.

³⁵⁴ Bremer (2006), 210-243. Chandrasekaran (13 February 2004); Colum Lynch (24 February 2004); Nick Wadhams (23 February 2004); Filkins (27 February 2004); Lasseter (26 January 2004); Farley and Efron (14 April 2004); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 40-48. Edward Cody (4 June 2004); Douglas and Walcott (13 November 2003); Wright and Williams, (13 November 2003); Dobbins et al (2009), 271-273.

³⁵⁵ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 20-21.

various Sunni tribes as an additional source of manpower.³⁵⁶ While the political process worked to exclude them, Sunni Arabs perceived that U.S. military operations aimed to repress them. This created a mutually reinforcing cycle that inflamed the insurgency. The detentions system became a fertile recruiting ground.³⁵⁷ Most detainees were Sunni Arabs. Military officials reportedly estimated that 70 to 90 percent of them were innocent. The Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse scandal, combined with widespread perceptions of injustice, added fuel to the insurgency.

This meant to Harvey and others that outreach to Sunni Arabs tribes was essential if the United States hoped to reduce the levels of violence against the coalition military. When American and British intelligence officials developed a plan to reach out to Sunni tribes, however, they were rebuffed. CPA official Meghan O’Sullivan reportedly stated that the CPA had no intention of making the tribes a formal part of the security or political structure.”³⁵⁸ “I was struck by the desperation of Iraq’s Sunni sheikhs, who feared and in many cases despised the brutal Zarqawi,” writes David Ignatius, “But couldn’t get tone-deaf U.S. officials in the international Green Zone to take their problems seriously.”³⁵⁹

In Anbar, the 1st Marine Division took over from the 82nd Airborne in March 2004. Their Commander, Major General Jim Mattis, issued instructions to limit civilian casualties: Marines would not fire artillery into populated areas merely based on radar acquisitions of enemy mortar projectiles, use excessive airstrikes, or rely heavily on firepower from M1A1 tanks.³⁶⁰ This

³⁵⁶ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 22-23, 703.

³⁵⁷ Mark Danner 2004, 7 October 2004); Chandrasekaran and Wilson (11 May 2004).

³⁵⁸ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 36-7.

³⁵⁹ Ignatius (2015).

³⁶⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 57-58.

corrective action suggests what tactics the previous American unit there had been using. Nonetheless, the Marines found patrolling into Fallujah tough going. Abu Musab al- Zarqawi, who arrived in Iraq in August 2002 expecting a U.S. invasion, was growing Tawhid wal-Jihad into a formidable terrorist network and angling to inflame a nascent sectarian civil war.³⁶¹ Large numbers of Anbaris as well as foreign *jihadis* flocked to join his ranks.³⁶² On March 31, a small patrol of Blackwater security guards was ambushed and one of the vehicles set on fire. The charred bodies were beaten with shovels by a frenzied mob and then hung on the city's main bridge. The city had become violently anti-coalition.³⁶³ Sanchez ordered an immediate offensive. Mattis argued that the timing was wrong and the mission was ill-advised until they could improve popular support, but Sanchez insisted on moving forward.³⁶⁴ On April 6, the Marines commenced Operation Vigilant Resolve to deal with the growing threat in Fallujah. Most Iraqi security forces who were to participate deserted immediately.³⁶⁵ The offensive, the first large scale assault on a major city since the end of Saddam, amplified outrage in Iraq and played into Zarqawi's hands. A heated exchange between Sanchez and Bremer took place as the latter demanded the operation be called off.³⁶⁶ Sanchez relented.

He and Bremer decided instead to shift priority to the Sadr threat. Sanchez designed the plan and briefed Bremer, who sought White House permission. Arresting Sadr was refused in the belief that such an operation could enrage Shi'as and disrupt the June transfer of power.³⁶⁷

³⁶¹ McChrystal (2013), 89-109. Ignatius (2015). McCants (2015).

³⁶² Gordon & Trainor (2012), 58-59.

³⁶³ Dobbins et al (2009), 307.

³⁶⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 66.

³⁶⁵ Ricks (2006), 330-335; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 56-66.

³⁶⁶ Sanchez (2008), 350-355.

³⁶⁷ Sanchez (2008), 364-365.

Washington, D.C. failed to appreciate the internal Shi'a rivalry. The coalition had increased military pressure on JAM. This created a backlash in some Shi'a communities but bloodied the Mahdi Army. Sadr ordered his forces to stand down in the face of heavy losses.³⁶⁸ He remained at large and his popularity grew, however, while Sunni Arabs seethed.³⁶⁹

From Decisive Victory to Transition

With decisive victory clearly out of reach, the United States' approach to war termination defaulted toward transition-and-withdraw. This was not a change of strategy. The Bush administration was lowering the bar of success as they sought a way out.³⁷⁰ Bremer passed control to the IIG Prime Minister Iyad Allawi on June 28, 2004. The CPA disbanded. CJTF-7 also stood down. A new civil-military country team provided an opportunity to look at the situation with a fresh set of eyes. An American Embassy was established in Baghdad, with John Negroponte as the Chief of Mission. General George Casey took command of Multi-National Forces Iraq on 1 July 2004. They signed the Joint Mission Statement on August 17, 2004, to reduce the civil-military chasm that existed under Bremer and Sanchez. They also established a "Red Cell" to assess the nature of the conflict and suggest a coordinated civil-military way forward.³⁷¹ The pre-eminent threat, the new plan stated, was Sunni insurgents and members of the former regime – "Sunni Arab Rejectionists" and "Former Regime Elements." The goal for the coalition was not to defeat the insurgents, but to "reduce the insurgency to levels that can be contained by ISF [Iraqi Security Forces], and that progressively allow Iraqis

³⁶⁸ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 67-73.

³⁶⁹ Dobbins et al (2009), 312-314; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 66.

³⁷⁰ Sanger and Schmitt (10 January 2005).

³⁷¹ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 95-97.

to take charge of their own security.”³⁷² President Bush described it succinctly in a 28 June 2005 speech at Fort Bragg, “As they stand up, we stand down.”³⁷³ The essence of the plan was to build and train Iraqi security forces, hand-over control of battle-space to them while achieving the political milestones set out by Bremer, and draw-down U.S. presence.³⁷⁴

The rules for the upcoming 30 January 2005 national election, however, entrenched Sunni disadvantage and resistance. A key decision was whether to divide Iraq into multiple voting districts or to treat it as a single national district. If seats were allocated by dividing Iraq into local voting districts, Sunni Arab candidates would logically win seats in predominantly Sunni Arab areas such as Anbar province.³⁷⁵ If Iraq was treated as a single voting district, the advantage would go to the Shi’a and Kurdish parties due to insecurity and insurgency in Sunni Arab areas. The decision to treat Iraq as a single national district was part of a U.N. brokered compromise to appease Sistani’s demands for elections in 2004. This poll was to elect an Iraqi National Assembly from which the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) would be formed. The ITG was to draft an Iraqi constitution that would be put to an up-or-down national vote. Former CPA official Meghan O’Sullivan argues that treating Iraq as a single voting district was the only realistic way to pull off elections within this timeline.³⁷⁶ This may be true, but the decision reinforced Sunni Arab concerns about political marginalization. Many Sunni Arab leaders called for a boycott of the election; other Sunni Arabs were probably too scared to vote

³⁷² Quoted in Gordon & Trainor (2012), 97.

³⁷³ The White House, “President Addresses Nation, Discusses Iraq, War on Terror,” 28 June 2005

³⁷⁴ To deflect growing criticism about the direction of the war, the Bush Administration released an unclassified version of its strategy. See U.S. National Security Council, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” 30 November 2005.

³⁷⁵ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 16 June 2005.

³⁷⁶ O’Sullivan and al-Saiedi (2014), 10-11. See also United Nations, Iraq Electoral Factsheet, January 2005.

due to threats made by Zarqawi and other insurgent leaders.³⁷⁷ In Anbar, the turnout was only two percent.³⁷⁸ Violence on polling day was high, but 58% of eligible voters reportedly participated.³⁷⁹ Allegations of rigging included ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, fraudulent voter registration, vote buying, and importation of non-Iraqi Kurds to cast votes for Kurdish parties.³⁸⁰ The United Iraqi Alliance, a coalition of non-Sadrist Shi'a religious parties, came in first. The Kurdish parties were second; Allawi's Shi'a-Sunni coalition secured only 25 seats. For the 275-member parliament, Sunnis tallied only 8% representation.³⁸¹

After post-election jockeying by the parties to form a government, Ibrahim al-Jaafari finally secured the prime minister post on April 7. Jaafari was not a strong national figure backed by a militia. Iraq's Shi'a strongmen settled on a non-threatening figure who posed little risk to their power and authority. Bayan Jabr from SCIRI was awarded the powerful Interior Ministry. He acted swiftly to intensify de-Baathification and remove Sunnis from leadership positions.³⁸² Sectarian violence, to include atrocities, rose.³⁸³ Iran, meanwhile, continued its influence campaign with the new Iraqi government (they reportedly gave millions of dollars to Jaafari in advance of the election), while enhancing their lethal support to Shi'a militias that were fighting the coalition and engaging in sectarian cleansing.³⁸⁴

³⁷⁷ O'Sullivan and al-Saiedi (2014), 10-11; Gordon and Trainor (2012), 135.

³⁷⁸ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 135;

³⁷⁹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems, "Election Guide: Republic of Iraq, 30 January 2005;" Gordon and Trainor (2012), 135.

³⁸⁰ U.S. Embassy Ankara Cable 19 January 2005 and 6 June 2005; U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables 22 August 2005; 16 September 2005; 8 December 2005c and 15 December 2005b.

³⁸¹ Chandrasekaran (2006), 336.

³⁸² U.S. Embassy Cable 9 January 2006; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 140-141.

³⁸³ *The Washington Times* (16 November 2005); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 144-150; 185-187.

³⁸⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 142-3, 151-157, 188-189, 191-195; Dobbins et al (2009), 327-328.

Major Shi'a and Kurdish advantages in parliament gave them significant influence in drafting the constitution. This would be approved or rejected in an October 2005 referendum. In advance of the vote Sistani explained to U.S. officials his preference for a provincial-based over single district concept as the former would prevent Kurdish fraud from inflating their number of seats in parliament, and could increase Sunni representation.³⁸⁵ A new electoral law created 18 electoral districts (based on the 18 Iraqi provinces) instead of treating Iraq as a single national district.³⁸⁶ This time, the Sunni Arab leader encouraged participation. The October referendum also included a provision that the draft constitution would be disapproved if two-thirds of voters in three provinces rejected it.³⁸⁷ This risk to this system was election rigging to repress Sunni turn out and inflate Shi'a or Kurdish votes in mixed provinces such as Diyala, Salah ad-Din, and Ninewa. In the event, the constitution was approved, albeit with significant Sunni Arab concerns of fraud in those provinces.³⁸⁸

The final milestone was the parliamentary elections set for December 2005 to form a permanent Iraqi government. Concerns about electoral fraud, however, increased as the polling approached, including allegations of ballot stuffing, intimidation, fraudulent registration and vote buying.³⁸⁹ The de-Baathification commission removed 90 Sunni Arab candidates from eligibility.³⁹⁰ After the polling, Sunni Arab and secular party leaders protested massive fraud by the government and Shi'a and Kurdish parties.³⁹¹ Sunni Arab leaders complained to

³⁸⁵ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable 3 July 2005.

³⁸⁶ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 16 September 2005.

³⁸⁷ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable 11 October 2005.

³⁸⁸ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables 15 October 2005 and 25 October 2005.

³⁸⁹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables 8 December 2005a, 8 December 2005c, and 13 December 2005.

³⁹⁰ U.S. Embassy Riyadh Cable, 2 January 2006.

³⁹¹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 15 December 2005b, 9 January 2006, and 20 January 2006; Cordesman (10 January 2006), 4.

Khalilzad that their constituency was “under siege” from the terrorists, the government, and the coalition.³⁹² Violence reportedly increased, particularly around Baghdad.³⁹³ Reflecting on the historic 2005 elections series, Allawi complained that they undercut rather than advanced democracy in Iraq.³⁹⁴

A relatively low-profile figure with a deep sectarian past, Nouri Kamal al-Maliki, finally emerged as the Prime Minister and was sworn in with a new cabinet on May 20, 2006.³⁹⁵ Maliki continued aggressive sectarian violence using both Iraqi forces and the Sadrist party-cum-militia Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM).³⁹⁶ A Sunni Arab leader told U.S. officials that “The extrajudicial practices of Shia police in Anbar province fueled the insurgency.”³⁹⁷ When U.S. officials presented Maliki with evidence of sectarian atrocities at the hands of these forces, he reportedly replied that things were worse under Saddam.³⁹⁸ Saudi King Abdullah complained to U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad that the United States had given Iraq to Iran as a “gift on a golden platter.”³⁹⁹

Polling data collected by the Defense Intelligence Agency showed confidence in Iraqi security forces dwindling among Sunni Arabs while support for armed resistance was increasing.⁴⁰⁰ Attacks rose from 200 per week in January 2004 to over 1000 per week in July 2006. They

³⁹² U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable 21 January 2006.

³⁹³ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 7 January 2006 and 8 January 2006.

³⁹⁴ Allawi (2 November 2007).

³⁹⁵ Khedery (3 July 2014).

³⁹⁶ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 211-219. JAM was party of Maliki’s governing coalition.

³⁹⁷ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 5 December 2005

³⁹⁸ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 216.

³⁹⁹ U.S. Embassy Riyadh Cable, 2 January 2006

⁴⁰⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 210.

would nearly double again to 1800 per week in July 2007.⁴⁰¹ A sectarian civil war was well underway, with atrocities on both sides of the Sunni-Shi'a divide.⁴⁰² The Sunni insurgency had become sustainable, enjoying local popular and external support. The Maliki government exploited American forces and Jaish al-Mahdi to consolidate Shi'a power and exact retribution for decades of abuse at the hands of Saddam. Despite these shocking levels of violence, Casey and Rumsfeld began canceling deployment orders for units scheduled to go to Iraq, and remained convinced that the United States had to draw-down to win.⁴⁰³ The conditions were well-established for a counterinsurgency loss.

Conclusion

Why did this toxic combination arise? Existing explanations focus on the lack of Phase IV planning, inadequate troop presence to maintain security, and poor political – military integration.⁴⁰⁴ These problems contributed greatly, but are parts of a larger cause: a failure to develop a strategy resilient to the competitive, interactive, and often violent nature of politics in post-conflict societies. America deployed a well-trained and sophisticated military force, highly experienced diplomats, and extensive civilian expertise. By 2006, US forces were losing to a poorly trained, badly equipped, and badly resourced insurgency, while being ably manipulated by Iraqi elites who had less education, resources, and expertise. This was a failure in American leadership and management.

⁴⁰¹ Brookings Institution, "Iraq Index," 1 October 2007, 4.

⁴⁰² Knickmeyer and Sebti (28 February 2006).

⁴⁰³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 211-212.

⁴⁰⁴ Bensahel et al (2008), xvii; PBS Frontline, "Interview with Robert Blackwill;" Dobbins et al (2009), 326-333; Diamond (2004); Bremer argued that failure to provide security was the biggest obstacle to progress, and lamented in 2006 the persistent lack of a military plan to defeat the Sunni insurgency, see Bremer (2006), 397-399.

The Bush administration failed to consider war termination in its policy and strategy. They fixated on the military campaign, ignored warnings about probable post-Saddam risks, and thus heightened the likelihood of quagmire. The Administration failed to develop a strategy that integrated all elements of national power toward a favorable and durable outcome and was resilient enough to adapt to emerging risks. The military campaign plan was sufficient to defeat a poorly trained and incompetently led Iraqi Army, but too rigid to adapt to the dynamic aftermath. Despite ample warnings from the Intelligence Community and a wide array of experts about the risks of post-regime instability, the Bush administration clung to the optimistic assumptions underpinning the campaign plan.⁴⁰⁵ Wolfowitz's testimony on 27 February 2003, just weeks before the invasion, that he could not imagine more troops being required for stabilization than were needed to defeat the Iraqi armed forces suggests such risks were never seriously contemplated.⁴⁰⁶ The Department of Defense and the Bush Administration fell victim to the *planning fallacy* discussed in Chapter 2. They were not alone. If State had grave concerns about the prospects for success, Powell could have recommended to Bush an interagency war-game. As a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, he was aware of the utility of this tool to expose problems. The failure to understand the difference between strategy and plans had significant consequences.

The CPA developed on the fly and implemented a milestone-centric plan that viewed post-war security and reconstruction as an engineering task. It took an approach suitable for a complicated task (one with many important, sequential steps) and tried to make it work in a complex, dynamic and interactive environment. This approach was so deeply ingrained in U.S. civilian and military officials that no one thought to question it. Each milestone was exploited

⁴⁰⁵ Pillar (2006), 18-19; Crane (2005), 27-36.

⁴⁰⁶ Wolfowitz (2003)

by those with the most to gain. The Sunni Arab sense of alienation grew as the coalition military and Iraqi government were perceived to be adding repression to political exclusion. As more Sunnis Arabs fought back, Shi'a leaders pressed their advantage. Higher troop levels in 2003 might have delayed the onset of insurgency, but could not ensure government legitimacy or convince Sunni Arabs to accept what they perceived to be a state of oppression.

To be sure, a re-balancing of political power to reflect Iraqi demographics was bound to reduce Sunni Arab and enhance Shi'a and Kurdish influence. This was even more reason the Bush Administration, CPA, and military should have taken extra care to ameliorate the effects of political change on the Sunni Arabs. Plenty of indicators, warnings, and expert assessments before the war pointed toward the risks. The United States, however, was unprepared for the intense scrimmage for power among Iraqi elites.⁴⁰⁷ De-Baathification and disbanding the Army, both decisions taken after deliberation within the Bush Administration, had a disproportionately large effect on Sunni Arabs. Excessive military efforts in the Sunni Triangle, torture, and abuse fueled resentment. Together, they stoked armed resistance and a belief that there was no place in the new Iraq for Sunni Arabs.⁴⁰⁸ These policies and actions were encouraged and amplified by Shi'a leaders eager to consolidate power and avenge years of humiliation and abuse. A proper strategy that was adaptable to the likely scrimmage for power, score-settling, and potential for sectarianism would have put the United States in a much better position to prevent or mitigate the worst outcomes, and would likely have limited self-sabotaging policies and actions. As Gordon and Trainor put it, "Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Tommy Franks spent most of their time and energy on the least demanding task – defeating

⁴⁰⁷ Interview with Lieutenant General Terry A. Wolff.

⁴⁰⁸ Eisenstadt and White (December 2005), 2-3.

Saddam's weakened conventional forces – and the least amount of time on the most demanding – rehabilitation and security for the new Iraq.”⁴⁰⁹

The Administration's governing strategy document, however, blithely asserted that the political, military, and economic elements of its strategy were “integrated and mutually reinforcing.”⁴¹⁰ This was true, but not in the way the Administration intended. The efforts worked together in a downward spiral. The political and military objectives were never prioritized and integrated. Each track operated largely on its own logic and trajectory. Military and civilian officials were working extraordinarily hard in their own silos of responsibility, doing their best to adapt their individual efforts to a dynamic environment. The main problems were occurring at the fault-lines between civilian and military actions – at the interface of the silos. Security is interconnected with effective governance and political inclusion, not simply the first step in a sequence of tasks.⁴¹¹

No one in Iraq had the authority, responsibility, and accountability, however, to ensure these efforts worked in concert toward achieving a successful outcome and adapted to constantly emerging risks along the seams. The fact of the matter is that the White House and National Security Council were in no position to run a limited war full-time when they had responsibilities across the globe, domestic policy to manage, and departments to run. In the absence of full-time governance of American and coalition efforts on the ground, political and military activities unwittingly self-synchronized in ways that empowered a highly sectarian Iraqi government and amplified Sunni resistance. The result by 2006 was a sustainable

⁴⁰⁹ Gordon & Trainor (2006), 503.

⁴¹⁰ National Security Council, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” (2005), p. 2.

⁴¹¹ Dobbins & Miller (2013); See also Caplan (2012), 316; Kolenda (2012).

insurgency fighting against the coalition and an increasingly sectarian and predatory Iraqi government that showed little interest in earning Sunni Arab support.

Chapter 4: Staying the Course

From 2003 to the end of 2006, American military and political leaders were slow to recognize the character of the conflict: a Sunni Arab insurgency fighting a predatory sectarian Iraqi government and its coalition backers. Shi'a militias contributed to the sectarian violence and attacks against international forces. Despite a clearly declining security and political situation, confirmation bias became evident as U.S. leaders extolled examples of progress while remaining wedded to transition-and-withdrawal plans. Alternative views were suppressed or dismissed by the military command and Administration officials.⁴¹² By late 2006, a groundswell of alternative viewpoints were being discussed in Washington D.C. Supported by retired General Jack Keane, critics such as intelligence official Derek Harvey and scholar Frederick Kagan convinced the Bush Administration that the situation in Iraq was nearing disaster and that a surge of military forces and capabilities under a new strategy was needed.⁴¹³ President Bush approved the surge in January 2007 as General David H. Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker, the new Commander and U.S. Ambassador, respectively, developed a new U.S.-led approach to the conflict. This included reconciliation efforts with disaffected Sunni tribes.⁴¹⁴ By late-2008, the security situation in Iraq had stabilized. Al Qaeda in Iraq was decimated.⁴¹⁵ But the American public had tired of the conflict. They elected Barack Obama for president in 2008, who made ending the war in Iraq a major part of his campaign.

⁴¹² Gordon & Trainor (2012), 158-179.

⁴¹³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 267-311.

⁴¹⁴ Mansoor (2013); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 329-350.

⁴¹⁵ Ignatius (2015).

Why did the United States cling to a losing approach for three years? The existing scholarship focuses mainly on the reasons why the war went poorly and then on the relative merits of the 2007 surge. A few works discuss the strategic paralysis before the surge. Bob Woodward's, *State of Denial*, illustrates how the persistent narrative of optimism within the Bush administration and officials in Baghdad impeded objective assessments and strategic decision-making.⁴¹⁶ Gordon and Trainor's authoritative volume *The Endgame* describes the interconnected problems of an expanding insurgency and growing sectarianism in the Iraqi government and security forces, civilian and military persistence with the campaign plan, and the process that led to the surge decision. This chapter will examine why the paralysis occurred and how the Bush administration overcame it.⁴¹⁷

The Administration experienced three mutually reinforcing problems. First, they fell victim to *confirmation bias* in which even strikingly unfavorable information was described as evidence of success. This resulted in large part from implicit assumptions about the war, the tendency to operate in bureaucratic silos, and how the Administration measured progress. Second, were severe *patron-client problems* that trapped the United States in a downward spiral. Third, was a powerful sense of *loss aversion*. In comparing the status quo with the prevailing Democrat alternative to cut losses and withdraw, the Administration was unwilling to pay the penalty of admitting defeat. Change become possible when an alternative approach provided the Administration a chance to reverse a probable loss. Clinging stubbornly to a losing approach, however, cost public support. Even though a more effective campaign plan was showing promise, the American people had had enough.

⁴¹⁶ Woodward (2006).

⁴¹⁷ Elizabeth Stanley (2009b) shows that a change in regime is normally needed to alter a "sticky" strategy.

Achieving Milestones while Losing the War

Confirmation bias was a major impediment for the Bush administration. As discussed in Chapter 2, those with confirmation bias tend to place undue emphasis on information that supports their theories and beliefs, while discounting or rationalizing disconfirming information. This problem impedes sound assessments and decision-making. The Bush administration and its civilian and military leaders in Iraq worked hard to understand the situation and make smart decisions. They were hindered by the tendency to divide the war into component parts within bureaucratic silos. This resulted in assessments of progress by aggregating tangible achievements within each silo. U.S. Lieutenant General James Dubik offered an illustrative example of this mentality occurring as late as 2007. One of the general officers in charge of individual training told Dubik that he had trained the requisite numbers of Iraqi soldiers “so his task was complete.”⁴¹⁸ Officials in Washington D.C. and Iraq assumed all the individualized progress was leading toward a successful outcome – reinforcing a belief that the war was on track. This process masked how efforts in those silos were being manipulated and self-synchronizing in damaging ways. The strategic damage, as discussed in Chapter 3, was occurring in the seams and fault lines between the silos.⁴¹⁹ This was a problem that senior officials, many conditioned by decades of working in bureaucracies, failed to understand. The narrative of progress, which strained credulity, reinforced a stubborn refusal to change.

The Administration had plenty of data to support its narrative. Iraq was hitting all the major benchmarks. Politically, the elections were taking place, a new Constitution was drafted and

⁴¹⁸ Interview with Lieutenant General James Dubik, commander of Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq, 2007-8.

⁴¹⁹ As noted in Chapters 2, seams denote gaps between silos that can be exploited by host nation actors or adversaries. Fault lines describe problems in which efforts in one silo undermine efforts in others.

voted upon, successive governments were established, major legislation was drafted and enacted. In fact, the Iraqi government achieved every single benchmark set forth in the transitional political process outlined in U.N. Resolutions 1546 (2004) and 1723 (2006).⁴²⁰ On the security front Iraqi Security Forces were being trained, equipped, and fielded largely on time.⁴²¹ Saddam Hussein was captured and put on trial. AQI leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi was killed. The Sunni Arab and Sadrist insurgencies were suffering tremendous casualties. Economically, major developmental contracts were awarded and the oil industry was beginning to recover.⁴²² In short, the Administration was meeting its standards for success in its political, military, and economic lines of effort.

By October 2004, the Bush Administration had differentiated the enemy in Iraq into three tiers: Sunni Arab Rejectionists, Former Regime Elements (FRE), and international terrorists.⁴²³ This characterization was maintained in the “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq” published in November 2005.⁴²⁴ Sunni Arab Rejectionists were described as those “who have not embraced the shift from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq to a democratically governed state,” while Saddamists and Former Regime Elements, “harbor dreams of establishing a Ba’athist dictatorship.”⁴²⁵ American officials estimated that the first two tiers had some 3,500 fighters and 12,000 – 20,000 supporters. Foreign terrorists totaled roughly 1000.⁴²⁶ Nonetheless, the intelligence

⁴²⁰ UNSCR 1546, 8 June 2004; UNSCR 1723, 28 Nov 2006; See also DoD’s *9204 report* (October 2005), 6.

⁴²¹ National Security Council, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” (2005), 20.

⁴²² *9204 report*, October 2005, 2-4.

⁴²³ Porter (April 15, 2006).

⁴²⁴ National Security Council, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” (2005), 6-7.

⁴²⁵ National Security Council, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” (2005). 6-7.

⁴²⁶ U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee: Testimonies of General John Abizaid (March 1, 2005); General George Casey (June 23, 2005); *Face the Nation*: Interview with General John Abizaid, June 26, 2005; These figures likely under-represented the strength of the Sunni Arab insurgency. See Eisenstadt & White (2005), p. 7-11; Baram (April 2005).

community, even in late 2005, had a tough time understanding the nature of the enemy, its relationship to the population, and the implications for U.S. strategy.⁴²⁷ The practical differentiation between Sunni Arab Rejectionists (deemed reconcilable) and Former Regime Elements (deemed irreconcilable), for example, could be difficult to determine without substantial engagement with various leaders of each. Moreover, such distinction treated the insurgency as a collection of individuals, rather than groups operating to achieve certain goals and objectives.

The Department of Defense graph below charts enemy initiated attacks (EIAs).⁴²⁸ EIAs were an imprecise but consistent estimate of insurgent strength. Weekly attacks increased roughly three-fold to 600 per week from January to July 2004. The upward trend continued to 800 per week when Maliki came to power in May 2006. Sectarian violence, as noted in the previous chapter, intensified. Curiously, the Bush administration did not include violence levels in the security assessment.⁴²⁹

⁴²⁷ David Morgan (September 29, 2005).

⁴²⁸ *9204 Report* (March 2008), 18 [Events and red trend-lines added]. For more on the challenges of assessing insurgencies, see Mayer (1985). On analytical measures, see Roche and Watts, (June 1991), 165–209.

⁴²⁹ National Security Council, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” (2005), 13. Security metrics included, “The quantity and quality of Iraqi units; the number of actionable intelligence tips received from Iraqis; the percentage of operations conducted by Iraqis alone or with minor Coalition assistance; the number of car bombs intercepted and defused; offensive operations conducted by Iraqi and Coalition forces; and the number of contacts initiated by Coalition forces, as opposed to the enemy ... These indicators have more strategic significance than the metrics that the terrorists and insurgents want the world to use as a measure of progress or failure: number of bombings.”

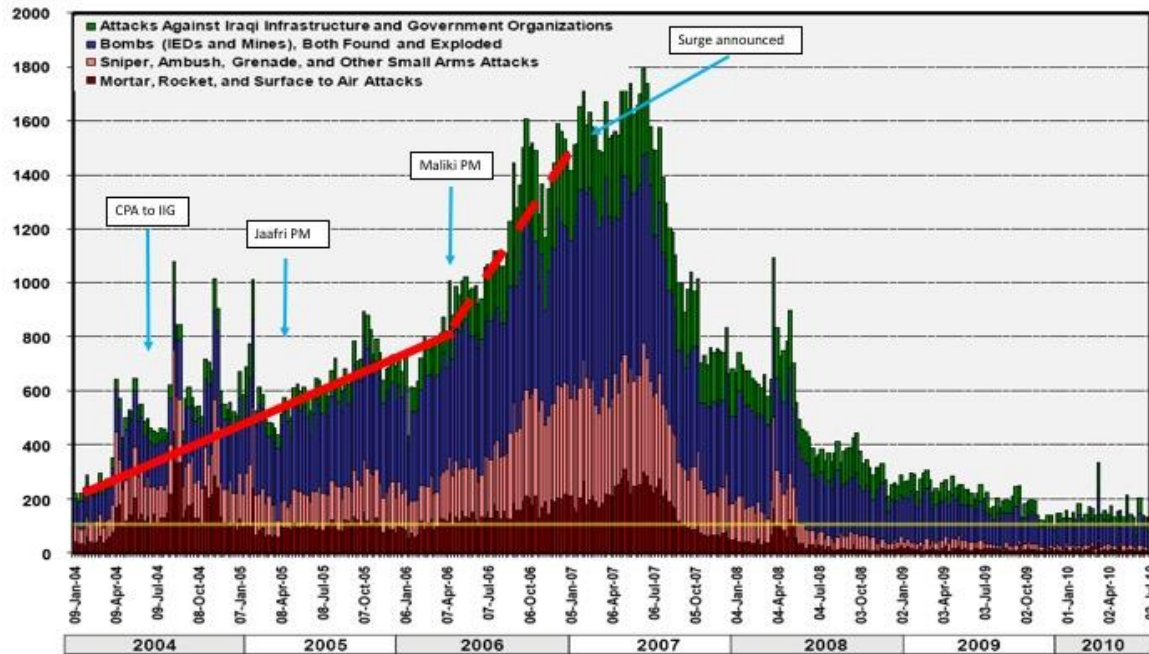


FIGURE 3: ANNOTATED ENEMY INITIATED ATTACKS, IRAQ

Polling data revealed a more complicated picture. Surveys can be problematic in combat zones, particularly if people believe they might be at risk of harm based on how they answer.⁴³⁰ Nonetheless, a significant percentage of Iraqis polled across ethnic and sectarian lines in March/April 2004 supported the idea of a parliamentary democracy (54%), believed they would be better off five years from now (63%), and supported laws guaranteeing freedom of speech (94%), assembly (77%), and religion (73%). Most surveyed believed U.S. forces behaved badly (58%) and viewed them as occupiers (71%). The same poll showed widespread support for Iraqi police and the new Iraqi Army.⁴³¹ A September 2004 poll conducted by the State Department, however, showed that Iraqi perceptions of security continued to decline.⁴³² A significant percentage of Sunni Arabs (88% by January 2006) supported the insurgency or

⁴³⁰ See Vincent, Eles, and Vasiliev (2009).

⁴³¹ USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll, March/April 2004

⁴³² "Opinion Analysis," U.S. Department of State Office of Research, M-106-04, September 16, 2004, Appendix 6A; Bensahel et al (2008), xxvi, note 7.

believed attacks on coalition and government forces were justified.⁴³³ “The Sunni Arab insurgency is gaining strength and increasing capacity,” a 24 May 2006 intelligence assessment surmised, “despite political progress and security forces development.”⁴³⁴

The interpretations of the data reveal the dominant mental model within the Bush administration and U.S. officials in Baghdad. This model was largely based on the reductionist, milestone-centric approach to building the Iraqi state and defeating the insurgency. Based on the progress in meeting political, military and economic benchmarks, Vice President Cheney concluded on May 30, 2005, that the insurgency was “in its last throes.”⁴³⁵ In June 2005 CENTCOM Commander General John Abizaid explained that the number of Iraqis in the insurgency was only 0.1 percent of the population.⁴³⁶ U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, even as late as August 2005, described the opposition as “dead-enders” and remnants of the former regime, while downplaying the risk of civil war.⁴³⁷ The October 2005 Department of Defense report to Congress boasted, “One noteworthy strategic indicator of progress in the security environment is the continued inability of insurgents to derail the political process and timelines.”⁴³⁸ When questioned about the number of attacks rising,

⁴³³ Several polls in 2004 and 2005 showed Sunni support for insurgent attacks ranging from 43% to 85%. See Eisenstadt (26 August 2005); World Public Opinion.org, “What the Iraqi Public Wants,” Conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA); See also, The Brookings Institution, Iraq Index (1 October 2007)

⁴³⁴ Woodward (2006), 471.

⁴³⁵ CNN, “Iraq insurgency in ‘last throes,’ Cheney says,” June 20, 2005. The article refers to a 30 May 2005 interview of Cheney on “Larry King Live.”

⁴³⁶ *Face the Nation*: Interview with General John Abizaid, June 26, 2005. In a population of 27 million Iraqis, one-tenth of 1 percent would be 27,000 people. If accurate, such a percentage would be historically very low by comparison. See Eisenstadt & White (2005), p. 8-11, who assess a more likely figure of 100,000.

⁴³⁷ CNN, “Rumsfeld: Iraq not fated to civil war,” 23 August 2005; Ricks (2006), 168-172.

⁴³⁸ *9204 Report* (October 2005), 3.

Rumsfeld explained that the military's data collection was improving and "we're categorizing more things as attacks."⁴³⁹

The increasing violence remained an acute cause for concern, but accepted explanations for it conformed to the Administration's assumptions and way forward. Foreign occupation, the military command assessed, was a core motivator of violence. American officials believed that most Sunnis Arabs supported the government, but were prevented from showing it due to coercion and intimidation.⁴⁴⁰ General Abizaid explained that coalition troops generated "anti-bodies" within Iraqi society, determined to throw out the foreigners.⁴⁴¹ Once foreign troops withdrew the insurgency would die out.

Notably, the Administration resisted describing the armed resistance as an insurgency. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who had been using the term, decided in November 2005 to reject "insurgency" as an accurate description of those fighting the coalition and Iraqi government. "I think that you can have a legitimate insurgency in a country that has popular support and has a cohesiveness and has a legitimate gripe," he noted. "These people don't have a legitimate gripe." He preferred the label, "Enemies of the legitimate Iraqi government."⁴⁴² Imbedded in this odd terminology dispute is Rumsfeld's belief that Sunni Arabs had no legitimate reasons for fighting.

⁴³⁹ Woodward (2006), 475.

⁴⁴⁰ National Security Council, "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," (2005), p. 7. By August 2006, the Department of Defense acknowledged the increasing risk of sectarian civil war, but noted optimism that movement toward civil war could be prevented. *9204 Report* (August 2006), 34.

⁴⁴¹ Interviewee K: This meant elements in Iraqi society were mobilizing against foreign occupation. See also Ignatius (26 September 2005); Nagl (2014), 161.

⁴⁴² NBC News, "Rumsfeld: Don't Call Iraqi Enemy 'Insurgents'," November 29, 2005, *Emphasis added*.

The Administration was convinced that as political, military, and economic milestones were achieved the Iraqi people would realize they had a voice and a stake in their country's affairs. Those efforts, Rumsfeld believed, would reduce the insurgency.⁴⁴³ This assumption was evidenced in General Casey's view that the January 2005 election was a success, despite the Sunni Arab boycott. The inability of al Qaeda to block the vote, as he saw it, was an indicator that the insurgency had little popular support.⁴⁴⁴ The focus on progress made along the political, economic, and security benchmarks would continue to dominate the quarterly reports submitted by the Department of Defense through August 2006.⁴⁴⁵ The Bush administration interpreted the relevant data and concluded that the war was on track. In this view, the best course of action was to follow the Casey operational plan.

Our theories, Albert Einstein reportedly observed, are what we measure.⁴⁴⁶ They also inform how officials make sense of the mountains of data bombarding them in a dynamic, interconnected world. This is part of the reason confirmation bias can be so powerful. The data points above – to include the massive increases in violence – were interpreted by smart and experienced people to confirm the policy and military campaign plans were the right ones. In hindsight, the data above could be interpreted that Sunni Arabs were fighting against the new Shi'a-dominated order as well as foreign forces. If this interpretation were true, the civil war would continue even if American forces departed. This, however, was not the view of the Administration. The Administration's stubborn insistence that its strategy was working,

⁴⁴³ Gilmore (30 March 2005).

⁴⁴⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 137-139.

⁴⁴⁵ *9204 Report* (August 2006).

⁴⁴⁶ Senge (2006), 164.

prompted Senator Chuck Hagel to conclude, “The White House is completely disconnected from reality.”⁴⁴⁷

The American political left’s relentless calls for immediate disengagement – an approach which would have probably led to defeat – may have unwittingly reinforced the administration’s views. Bush resisted these calls, countering that withdrawal should be “conditions-based” along the standards outlined in the strategy.⁴⁴⁸ As will be discussed below, Rumsfeld and Casey dug in their heels until the very end against a proposed troop increase and change in strategy because they did not see the situation or their strategy as failing.

Trapped by Partners in a Losing Strategy

Confirmation bias was reinforced by patron-client problems that were trapping the United States in a losing approach. As discussed in Chapter 2, patron-client problems can be caused by interest misalignment, information asymmetries, and inadequate conditionality. They result in behaviors by the client (the Iraqi government) that are detrimental to the interests and objectives of the patron (the United States). As successive Iraqi governments grew more predatory and sectarian, misalignment of interests and objectives with the United States increased. American officials were slow to recognize the growing divergence due to significant information asymmetries that played into their pre-existing beliefs about political and military progress. Even when U.S. officials recognized problems, their unwillingness to apply conditionality resulted in Iraqi officials telling their American counterparts what the latter

⁴⁴⁷ Woodward (2006), 400.

⁴⁴⁸ Rosen (December 2005) forecasted, “If the occupation were to end, so, too, would the insurgency. After all, what the resistance movement has been resisting is the occupation,”

wanted to hear instead of changing behavior. These factors reinforced the status quo that was carrying the American effort perilously close to defeat.⁴⁴⁹

United States and Iraqi governments never developed a common strategy for the war.⁴⁵⁰ This resulted in significant interest misalignment. Subtle divergences and outright conflicts over objectives such as political inclusion, Iraqi security forces development, and U.S. military operations and troop dispositions were undermining the prospects of success. These problems, which often occurred along the seams of U.S. diplomatic and military silos, were masked by information asymmetries that Iraqi officials repeatedly used to their advantage. U.S. officials found themselves unable to hold Iraqi officials accountable for actions that were intensifying the conflict. Manipulation by Iraqi officials reinforced Bush administration perceptions that the Casey transition-and-withdraw plan was the right one.

The problem of Sunni Arab marginalization was not unknown to U.S. officials. Sunni Arab acceptance of the new government was essential to achieve the stability conditions that would enable America to withdraw. Cables from Baghdad show U.S. officials encouraging political inclusion and Iraqi officials responding in agreement.⁴⁵¹ As early as September 2005, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad formulated an action plan to address “deep-seated anxieties among the Sunni Arab population.”⁴⁵² The Americans aimed to assist the Iraqi government in reaching out to Sunni Arab Rejectionists, who were considered reconcilable, and in defeating the Former

⁴⁴⁹ For further discussion see al-Ali (2014).

⁴⁵⁰ Interview with Douglas E. Lute, who emphasized the lack of a coordinated diplomatic-political-military strategy; Interviewees A, B, C, D, and O.

⁴⁵¹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables 1 June 2005a; 13 June 2005; 5 July 2005b; 5 June 2006; 22 June 2006b; 25 June 2006; 12 August 2006a; 12 August 2006b; 7 October 2006; 13 November 2006; 20 December 2006.

⁴⁵² U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 6 September 2005;

Regime Elements (Ba'athists), who were not.⁴⁵³ In 2006, the Bush administration listed “security and national reconciliation” the first of their so-called three track approach with the Maliki government.⁴⁵⁴

Such backing must have seemed successful. Because the Sunni Arab boycott of the January 2005 elections left them little representation in the Iraqi Transitional Government that was to write the constitution, Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'afri expanded the constitutional committee to include their representation.⁴⁵⁵ Maliki developed a plan for reconciliation soon after taking office in 2006.⁴⁵⁶ The U.S. government does not appear to have devoted any resources or conditionality to addressing the “deep-seated anxieties” of the Sunni Arab community or measuring whether reconciliation efforts were having any effect. Political reconciliation, U.S. civilian and military leaders viewed, was a matter for the Iraqi government. When some commanders in Anbar experimented successfully with outreach to Sunni tribes in 2005, Casey applauded the efforts but denied requests for additional American forces to build on the early successes.⁴⁵⁷ When confronted with media reports about such efforts, Casey assured Iraqi officials that U.S. commanders were not “negotiating with insurgents.”⁴⁵⁸ A 1 October 2005 U.S. “civ-mil action plan” focused solely on capacity-building.⁴⁵⁹ It did not address issues such

⁴⁵³ National Security Council, “National Strategy for Victory in Iraq,” (2005), p. 6-7.

⁴⁵⁴ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 5 June 2006.

⁴⁵⁵ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 1 June 2005b.

⁴⁵⁶ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 5 June 2006; 22 June 2006b and 25 June 2006.

⁴⁵⁷ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 173. For other examples, see Gordon & Trainor (2012), 26, 35-37, 82-84, 96-97, 131-133, 135-139, 141, 168-175, 216-219, 228-229, 239, 241-263.

⁴⁵⁸ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables 11 July 2005b; 15 July 2005; 30 August 2005.

⁴⁵⁹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 1 October 2005.

as sectarianism or corruption. U.S. officials would often encourage Iraqi officials to “do more,” but stopped short of assertive action or conditionality.⁴⁶⁰

The Ja’afri and Maliki governments, however, maintained a dual-track policy of convincing the Americans of their politically inclusive *bona fides* while relentlessly pursuing the consolidation of Shi’a power. Iraqi security forces had been engaging in systematic human rights abuses, mainly targeted at Sunni Arabs. In contrast to American efforts to differentiate reconcilable from irreconcilable groups, both Ja’afri and Maliki and members of their administrations defined Sunni Arab insurgents as Ba’athists.⁴⁶¹ This promoted repression. Within its first ninety days in Iraq in 2005, the U.S. Third Infantry Division reported 57 allegations of detainee abuse by Iraqi officials.⁴⁶² U.S. officials received many reports about these and other problems, conveyed their concerns to Iraqi officials, but took little to no action to address them (other than creating more capacity-building efforts).⁴⁶³

For their part, Iraqi officials were adept at assuaging U.S. concerns. Ja’afri’s notoriously sectarian Minister of Interior Bayan Jabr repeatedly assured American officials that human rights reform was at the top of his reform agenda.⁴⁶⁴ He dismissed reports that one of his units, the so-called Wolf brigade, was engaged in human rights abuses, noting that they were his “most effective” special police forces.⁴⁶⁵ Iraqi investigations into reports of torture and abuse

⁴⁶⁰ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables 11 July 2005a; 13 March 2006; 24 March 2006c; 7 August 2006; and 16 October 2006.

⁴⁶¹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 1 June 2005a; 1 June 2005b; 6 August 2006; and 12 January 2007.

⁴⁶² U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 3 June 2005.

⁴⁶³ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 3 June 2005 5 July 2005a; 7 July 2005; 11 July 2005a; 21 July 2005; 30 August 2005; 6 October 2005; 10 October 2005; 24 March 2006a; 24 March 2006b; 3 April 2006; 22 June 2006a; 7 August 2006; 19 September 2006; 24 December 2006.

⁴⁶⁴ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 8 June 2005.

⁴⁶⁵ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 15 July 2005.

of 168 detainees at the so-called Bunker facility (a Ministry of Interior prison) were slow-rolled and largely forgotten.⁴⁶⁶ Despite such extensive reports, U.S. officials visiting from Washington, D.C. would take efforts to support their Iraqi counterparts. One senior Pentagon delegation, after visiting police training sites, told Jabr that they had been “impressed by what they had seen.”⁴⁶⁷ Human rights does not appear to have been a subject of discussion.

The American plan to stand-up Iraqi security forces, turn-over battlespace, and withdraw away from the cities nested perfectly with the Iraqi government’s sectarian strategy. Ja’afri told the *Washington Post* on June 24, 2005, “We strongly prefer an increase in quality of Iraqi forces, increase in number, increase in efficiency, increase in the effectiveness of tactics they use, as well as increase in equipment ... anything that will raise efficiency of Iraqi forces is something that will be very welcomed because it will allow other forces, especially American forces, to withdraw.”⁴⁶⁸ U.S. military officials poured money into police training. General Casey declared 2006 to be the “Year of the Police,” The American general officer in charge of Iraqi police development told the *New York Times*, “We’re trying to develop the police capability to the point where by the end of 2006 we can begin the transfer to civil security.”⁴⁶⁹ With Sunni Arabs increasingly marginalized in the security ministries, the ISF provided the Iraqi government with powerful muscle for the struggle against their sectarian rivals.⁴⁷⁰ In the absence of conditionality, capacity-building efforts improved the ability of the ISF to engage in predation.

⁴⁶⁶ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 1 December 2005 and 15 December 2005a.

⁴⁶⁷ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 20 October 2005;

⁴⁶⁸ Wright and VandeHei (June 24, 2005).

⁴⁶⁹ Schmitt (15 January 2006).

⁴⁷⁰ For a description of the sectarian strategy for control of Baghdad, see Gordon & Trainor (2012), 298.

As reported extensively in Chapter 3, U.S. military operations unwittingly played into Sunni Arab fears.⁴⁷¹ For instance, Iraqi Islamic Party leader Dr. Muhsin Abdal Hamid was “incorrectly targeted” and detained on a 30 May 2005 operation. Placards in Sunni Arab parts of Baghdad denounced the operation as “terrorism American-style” and vowed to throw out the occupier. U.S. officials expressed their apologies after learning of the incident, and then congratulated themselves on their “damage control” efforts.⁴⁷² Despite major U.S. military operations against Sadrist militia Jaish al-Mahdi, perceptions of bias persisted. Ja’afri’s Minister of Defense Dulaimi, a Sunni Arab, warned U.S. officials that Sunni Arabs believe that Iraqi and American forces are “blatantly anti-Sunni Arab.”⁴⁷³ Sectarian reprisals soared. In Baghdad alone, one eyewitness reported in early 2006, roughly fifty bodies were found daily. “The Sunnis usually beheaded their victims, while the Shiites drilled holes in their heads.”⁴⁷⁴

Sunni Arab participation in the December 2005 election did not reduce the violence. It got worse. Even before becoming prime minister, Maliki’s sectarianism was well-known.⁴⁷⁵ He was a compromise candidate put forward by U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad when neither Ja’afri nor Alawi could form a government.⁴⁷⁶ Maliki’s position was fragile. He faced an internal Shi’a threat from the Sadrists, who had opposed him in favor of Ja’afri. Any move to accommodate Sunni Arabs risked fracturing his governing coalition and ousting him from power.⁴⁷⁷ Eliminating Ba’athists, however, was a unifying theme. A Dawa party official (Maliki’s party)

⁴⁷¹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 20 June 2005.

⁴⁷² U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 11 June 2005.

⁴⁷³ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 27 July 2005.

⁴⁷⁴ Ignatius (2015): Knickmeyer & Sebti (28 February 2006).

⁴⁷⁵ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 30 April 2006.

⁴⁷⁶ Filkins (April 28, 2014)

⁴⁷⁷ Younis (December 18, 2015).

confided that “the Shia's deep-seated fear of the Baathists' return to power drives all Shia political decisions.”⁴⁷⁸ Maliki told U.S. officials that Ba’athists were the “primary threat” to Iraq’s security.⁴⁷⁹ The divergent views between U.S. and Iraqi officials of the Sunni Arab insurgency had consequences. An assessment of sectarian violence in Baghdad concluded that American operations unwittingly trapped Sunnis in their neighborhoods so Shi’a militias could go after and eliminate them. The Shi’a dominated National Police “were using us to cleanse areas of Sunni presence,” reported an American battalion commander serving in Baghdad, “and we essentially have no option because we’re supposed to partner with these guys.”⁴⁸⁰

Although most reporting focused on the police, the Iraqi Army had sectarian challenges as well. Ja’afri’s Minister of Defense Saadoun al-Dulaimi complained of pressures to put more Shi’a officials into key positions within the Ministry.⁴⁸¹ Frictions between the Ministries of Interior and Defense sometimes resulted in violence.⁴⁸² Maliki’s Minister of Defense Abdul Qader Obeidi assured U.S. officials that the Iraqi Army was non-sectarian and loyal to the Iraqi state.⁴⁸³ Iraqi officers, however, reported Shi’a militia influence was growing in the ranks.⁴⁸⁴

Maliki and his officials largely dismissed mounting evidence of sectarian atrocities given to them by American officials, with few consequences.⁴⁸⁵ Jawad al-Bolani, Maliki’s Interior

⁴⁷⁸ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 20 March 2006.

⁴⁷⁹ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cables, 20 December 2006; 6 August 2006; 12 January 2007.

⁴⁸⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 227, 239.

⁴⁸¹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables 4 September 2005; 4 December 2005; 25 March 2006; 30 April 2006.

⁴⁸² U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 3 March 2006.

⁴⁸³ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 12 August 2006b.

⁴⁸⁴ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 14 January 2007.

⁴⁸⁵ Dexter Filkins (April 28, 2014).

Minister, assured U.S. officials that promoting human rights was among his top priorities.⁴⁸⁶ When more allegations of police abuse were brought to their attention, U.S. officials issued a demarche.⁴⁸⁷ In response to a congressional query regarding what actions they had taken regarding widespread human rights violations, U.S. officials emphasized “vetting arrangements” with the Ministry of Interior, human rights and rule of law training for Iraqi police, their efforts to “press Iraqi senior officials” on the matter, and demarches.⁴⁸⁸ A U.S. congressional delegation urged Bolani to “purge” sectarian elements from the police.⁴⁸⁹ It seems that at no time prior to 2007 did U.S. military officials, diplomats, or Congress meaningfully penalize Iraqi officials or the government for perpetrating such abuses. The American general in charge of the police training mission insisted that reports of corruption, infiltration by sectarian militias, and dysfunction within the Ministry of Interior were inaccurate and unfair.⁴⁹⁰ One cable, while criticizing him for lackluster reform efforts, gave Bolani “good marks” for positive changes in human rights.⁴⁹¹

Assurances from the Iraqi government that they would take the lead on Sunni Arab political inclusion and conflict resolution would be proven cynical by such rampant sectarianism.⁴⁹² These promises kept the Americans out of the reconciliation business until 2007. For Ja’afri and Maliki especially, Sunni Arab political inclusion threatened their consolidation of power and their ability to prevent a return of an authoritarian Sunni Arab regime that could once again

⁴⁸⁶ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 22 June 2006a;

⁴⁸⁷ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 7 August 2006.

⁴⁸⁸ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 9 October 2006.

⁴⁸⁹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 11 October 2006.

⁴⁹⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 272.

⁴⁹¹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 7 January 2007.

⁴⁹² Nouri al-Maliki (9 June 2006); Solomon Moore (1 October 2006); Dan Murphy (23 June 2014).

persecute Shi'a Iraqis.⁴⁹³ Even Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurdish leader, rejected the Iraq Study Group's recommendation that the government reconcile with former Ba'athists.⁴⁹⁴ SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim flatly stated that Iraq already had a government of national unity, so there was no need for a reconciliation program. "We will never reconcile with the Saddamists. They were killing us for the last thirty-five years, and now we are paying them back."⁴⁹⁵

The flaccid response by U.S. officials towards the systematic sectarianism of the Ja'afri and Maliki governments is puzzling. These actions were alienating Sunni Arabs and creating support for insurgent groups that were killing American soldiers. Inducements – encouragement and better training – seemed to be the preferred approach. Sovereignty concerns probably provided some rationale– U.S. officials wanted to avoid the appearance of meddling in Iraqi political affairs (despite Khalilzad's activist approach in promoting Maliki for prime minister). The consequences to American credibility of acquiescing in such sectarianism does not appear to have been evaluated. An implicit assumption about civil-military relations was also at work. The notion of *objective control* of the military is so deeply ingrained in American political culture that U.S. military and civilian officials never questioned if the Iraqi government operated on the same principle.⁴⁹⁶ They did not. Maliki wanted *subjective control* because he feared a coup.⁴⁹⁷ Much of the Iraqi security forces were under the effective control of the U.S. military. Although American officials in Iraq would not

⁴⁹³ Filkins (April 28, 2014).

⁴⁹⁴ Nancy Trejos (11 December 2006).

⁴⁹⁵ Quoted in Gordon & Trainor (2012), 273.

⁴⁹⁶ See Chapter 2 for discussion of objective versus subjective control in civil-military relations.

⁴⁹⁷ Interview with Lieutenant General James Dubik who recalled that Maliki expressed such concerns to him. Although the Prime Minister did not use the word coup himself, Dubik said Maliki was clear what was meant. Interviewee A also noted Maliki's fears about a coup.

contemplate encouraging a coup, the United States had a history of supporting them during the Cold War.⁴⁹⁸ A much stronger fear for Maliki was the growing influence of Sadrist and Ba’athist militias within the Army and Police.⁴⁹⁹ “I am afraid to clash with militias and tribes,” Maliki confided in late October 2006 to Khalilzad, “*because I am afraid the army or police might commit treason*” [emphasis added].⁵⁰⁰

The most effective way for Maliki to reduce his vulnerability to an American sponsored coup was to weaken the U.S. military’s grip on the ISF. Maliki repeatedly expressed concerns about the weaknesses of the ISF, need for better weapons and equipment, and his desire to accelerate the transition and withdrawal of American troops.⁵⁰¹ Maliki told a visiting congressional delegation in October 2006 that significant numbers of American forces could be withdrawn within a year.⁵⁰² He badgered Casey that coalition military operations were damaging his political reconciliation efforts.⁵⁰³ In early November Maliki told Bush’s National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley that he wanted greater control over Iraq’s security. Hadley replied that President Bush supported the objective.⁵⁰⁴ Maliki pressed the issue with Casey in early February 2007, demanding full control of Iraqi Special Operations Forces.⁵⁰⁵ To address the threat of internal coup, Maliki told Casey and Khalilzad that “reliability” should be a key

⁴⁹⁸ Weiner (2007).

⁴⁹⁹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 3 July 2006; 22 August 2006; 16 October 2006; 29 October 2006; and 13 November 2006.

⁵⁰⁰ U.S. Embassy Cable, 29 October 2006.

⁵⁰¹ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 29 October 2006; 14 December 2006; 30 January 2007; and 8 February 2007.

⁵⁰² U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 7 October 2006.

⁵⁰³ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 12 August 2006a; 22 August 2006; 16 October 2006; and 8 February 2007.

⁵⁰⁴ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 9 November 2006.

⁵⁰⁵ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 8 February 2007.

consideration for ISF senior leaders.⁵⁰⁶ He would purge key officials and retain those who advanced his political agenda.⁵⁰⁷ Maliki's March 2008 "Charge of the Knights" operation in Basra and subsequent operations in Sadr City served as key tests of loyalty as the prime minister took on the Sadrist threat to his regime.⁵⁰⁸

For Bush, Iraq was too important to fail, and Iraqi leaders used that leverage to their advantage to maintain the status quo – sustaining lucrative capacity-building efforts, easing international forces out of the cities and the country, while resisting suggestions about reconciliation or troop surges. Even though the Americans would insist on outreach to the Sunnis, the Bush Administration believed until late 2006 that preventing failure overall meant uncritically supporting Maliki despite his sectarianism and the risks this posed to success. For his part, Maliki had far greater incentive to keep the Shi'a coalition on-side and to consolidate his grip on power than to risk fracturing his base by addressing Sunni Arab inclusion – especially while he had Americans fighting them. Iraqi government incentives aligned with those of American leaders who advocated staying the course. The result was perpetuation of a status quo damaging to U.S. interests.

A Possible Win Beats a Certain Loss

Loss aversion further entrenched the campaign plan. As explained in Chapter 2, this cognitive bias seeks to preserve perceived gains and resist changes in strategy that could put such gains at risk – even if the cost of the current strategy is high and the prospects of success are low.

⁵⁰⁶ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 16 October 2006.

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with LTG James Dubik; Interviewees A, D, and O.

⁵⁰⁸ For a discussion of the operation see Gordon and Trainor 2012), 470-504.

Conformation bias, progress along political and security milestones, and encouragement by Iraqi officials to maintain the transition-and-withdraw plan reinforced the virtues of the status quo against Democratic party calls to end the war. Trapped between an approach that they believed might work and an alternative that assured a loss, the Bush administration dug in. Major strategic change came about once the Bush administration reframed its reference point from winning to losing and found a new approach that promised to reverse a failing situation.

The removal of the Saddam Hussein regime and eventual replacement with an elected government was a clear gain for the Bush administration. Iraq's success in meeting key benchmarks reinforced perceptions of progress. The risks of forfeiting these gains was described in stark terms by the Bush administration in their 2005 *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, which was made public. The war on terror was the "defining challenge of our generation," like struggles against communism and fascism before. "The terrorists regard Iraq as the central front in their war against humanity," the administration explained, "And we must recognize Iraq as the central front in our war on terror." Failure in Iraq would create a new terrorist safe-haven from which al Qaeda could launch more September 11 – style attacks. "Ceding ground to terrorists in one of the world's most strategic regions will threaten the world's economy and America's security, growth, and prosperity, for decades to come." The current strategy "will help Iraqis overcome remaining challenges, but defeating the multi-headed enemy in Iraq – and *ensuring that it cannot threaten Iraq's democratic gains* once we leave – requires persistent effort across many fronts" [emphasis added].⁵⁰⁹

Reports from the Department of Defense echoed the gains. Each quarterly report submitted to Congress by the Department of Defense from July 2005 (when the reporting requirement began) to August 2006 marshaled evidence of achievements along political, economic, and

⁵⁰⁹ National Security Council, "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq," (2005), 2-6.

security lines of effort to show the strategy was working. Despite alarming increases in violence, the growth of sectarian atrocities, and the Iraqi government's clear efforts to marginalize Sunnis, not a single report during that period raised serious questions about risks to the strategy's viability.⁵¹⁰

In a fall 2005 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Andrew Krepinevich argued for a revised strategy he called the "oil spot" approach – a bottom-up that focused on creating and expanding secure enclaves.⁵¹¹ These kinds of suggestions were opposed consistently by the military command and U.S. embassy and gained no traction with the Bush Administration.⁵¹² The only significant alternative to the Democratic party's demands to end the war on a specified timeline was offered by Senator Joseph Biden, who called for a soft partition of Iraq into Shi'a, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish enclaves and a troop withdrawal by 2008.⁵¹³ The White House was not yet prepared to take such radical steps.

While projecting confidence, doubts reportedly crept into President Bush's mind by mid-2006, but the lack of alternatives for success reinforced the need to stay the course.⁵¹⁴ Bush wanted to protect gains in Iraq, which he believed would be forfeited under the Democrats' "cut and run" concept and would be put at risk in Casey's "conditions-based" transition-and-withdrawal plan. He did not seem to question the underlying logic of a strategy that was leading toward disaster.⁵¹⁵ The nature of the problem eluded the Baker-Hamilton commission – the so-called Iraq Study Group – that was directed by the United States Congress in 2006 to review the

⁵¹⁰ 9204 Reports, July 2005, October 2005, February 2006, May 2006, and August 2006.

⁵¹¹ Krepinevich (2005).

⁵¹² Mansoor (2013), 5-33.

⁵¹³ Biden and Gelb (1 May 2006).

⁵¹⁴ Woodward (2008), 4-13

⁵¹⁵ Mansoor (2013), 32-33.

situation in Iraq and recommend a more productive way forward. The conclusions reached by the group largely confirmed the status quo – a gradual handover of security to the Iraqis and drawdown of American troops.⁵¹⁶ During a June 2006 National Security Council discussion on Iraq at Camp David, Casey reportedly pressed the logic of his plan. “This strategy is shaped by a central tenet: Enduring, strategic success in Iraq will be achieved by Iraqis,” he argued. “Completion of political process [the recent formation of Maliki’s government] and recent operations [to include killing Zarqawi] have positioned us for a decisive action over the next year.”⁵¹⁷

Retired General Jack Keane, the former Vice Chief of the Army Staff, began to challenge that logic. Championing ideas proposed by defense intellectual Frederick Kagan, intelligence official Derek Harvey, and others, Keane argued that the American effort in Iraq was failing and would lose under the current strategy.⁵¹⁸ He and others noted that the Sunni Arab insurgency was directed both at coalition forces and the Iraqi government. Turning over security responsibility to Iraqi forces and withdrawing would play into the hands of those on both sides of the Sunni-Shi’a divide who were bent on civil war. Immediate withdrawal, as Democrats proposed, would have the same effect. Keane argued that the war could still be won with a five-brigade troop surge using a classic counterinsurgency approach that emphasized working with and protecting the people on the ground in local communities. Outreach to and relationships with Sunni Arab leaders was critical. So was reducing the sectarian violence in mixed neighborhoods, particularly in Baghdad.⁵¹⁹ This approach was not dissimilar to the one Krepinevich advocated in 2005, but Keane’s ability to show that the current approach would

⁵¹⁶ Baker and Hamilton (2006), 50; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 279-280.

⁵¹⁷ Quoted in Woodward (2008), 10.

⁵¹⁸ Kimberly Kagan (2009), 27-29.

⁵¹⁹ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 304.

guarantee a loss and a new approach could result in a win at acceptable cost was critical. When the questioned about whether surging five American Brigade Combat Teams risked breaking the Army, Keane reportedly replied that such risk existed, but “the stress and strain that would come from having to live with a humiliating defeat would be quite staggering.”⁵²⁰

Having heard the assessments and recommendations from Casey, the Iraq Study Group, the Democrats, and Keane, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley decided to make his own personal assessment of the situation. Arriving in Baghdad on October 29, 2006, Hadley became convinced that Keane was right. His memo to President Bush questioned whether the United States and Maliki shared the same vision and if the latter could rise above sectarianism. He noted that the actions of the government suggested a clear campaign to consolidate Shi’a power at the expense of the Sunni Arabs.⁵²¹

After the 2006 mid-term elections, which were a major set-back for the Bush administration, the National Security Council began to review their options in Iraq. Bush fired Rumsfeld – a clear signal that he wanted an overhaul to the strategy – and replaced him with former CIA Director Robert Gates.⁵²² Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was reportedly skeptical that adding more troops would make any sustainable difference.⁵²³ General Casey pushed back on the surge idea vigorously, arguing that any tactical gains made by the surge could damage the progress made in Iraqi ownership of security and governance.⁵²⁴ In its December 2006 report to Congress, the Department of Defense finally accepted that the conditions were present for a

⁵²⁰ Kaminski (20 September 2008); Woodward (2008), 281.

⁵²¹ *The New York Times*, “Text of U.S. Security Adviser’s Iraq Memo,” November 29, 2006; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 287-291.

⁵²² George W. Bush (2010), 93-4; Fletcher and Baker (November 9, 2006).

⁵²³ Woodward (2008), 232-4.

⁵²⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 293-294.

civil war and that more effective reconciliation efforts by the Iraqi government were needed to arrest this trend.⁵²⁵ The subtle change in sentiment neatly aligned with the Hadley memo. Still, the December 2006 report did not articulate at what point such risks required a change in strategy. Maliki was reticent, too, about a surge of American forces.⁵²⁶

A New Plan on Shaky Foundations

Bush announced the surge in a 10 January 2007 speech.⁵²⁷ To execute the new approach Bush changed his command team in Iraq, kicking Casey upstairs to be Army Chief of Staff and selecting General David Petraeus to replace him. Middle East expert Ambassador Ryan Crocker took over from Khalilzad as Chief of Mission in Baghdad. The mandate for change was clear. The new team wasted no time implementing the new strategy. Several close to the changes noted that the new approach “reversed virtually all of the previous concepts.”⁵²⁸ Bush began to hold weekly video teleconferences with that country-team and with Maliki. “Iraq consumed 80 percent of the NSC’s bandwidth in 2007 and 2008,” Bush’s former Deputy National Security Advisor Lute recalled, to the neglect of other issues.⁵²⁹

The March 2007 DoD report to Congress, largely authored by Petraeus, was a radical departure from the earlier themes of optimism and progress.

⁵²⁵ *9204 Report* (August 2006).

⁵²⁶ Tavernise and Burns (11 January 2007); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 308. See also the previous section of this chapter.

⁵²⁷ Congressional Quarterly Transcripts Wire, “President Bush Addresses Nation on Iraq War,” 10 January 2007.

⁵²⁸ Interviewees A, B, C, D, and O; quotation from interviewee O.

⁵²⁹ Interview with Douglas E. Lute.

The strategic goal of the United States for Iraq remains a unified, democratic, federal Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself, and that is an ally in the war on terror.... To regain the initiative, the GOI is working with the United States and its Coalition partners, embarking on a new approach to restore the confidence of the Iraqi people in their government; to build strong security institutions capable of securing domestic peace and defending Iraq from outside aggression; and to gain support for Iraq among its neighbors, the region, and the international community.

The report noted that its assessment of the situation should be “read as a baseline from which to measure future progress, and indications of success must be heavily caveated given the dynamic situation in Iraq.”⁵³⁰ In other words, the claims from previous reports should be discarded.

The new approach was tactically successful. Weekly attacks spiked in the summer 2007 as the surge brigades arrived and began operations. Sunni Arab leaders had been frustratingly trapped in an AQI-inspired civil war they could not win. With American forces now responding positively to outreach efforts, the surge and the so-called Anbar Awakening became mutually reinforcing.⁵³¹ Sunni Arab leaders began turning to the American military for protection against AQI reprisals and from the Iraqi government and its supportive militias. Violence levels fell dramatically in late 2007 as the Awakening spread throughout Sunni Arab communities.⁵³²

Maliki’s “Charge of the Knights,” a surprise Iraqi military offensive in Basra, ended an ulcerating Sadrist threat.⁵³³ To many senior officials in the U.S. government, this operation was

⁵³⁰ 9204 Report (March 2007), 1-2.

⁵³¹ Biddle et al (2012), pp. 7–40.

⁵³² Gordon & Trainor (2012), 369-388.

⁵³³ Filkins (April 28, 2014); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 213-219.

viewed as proof that Maliki was a “post-sectarian” leader.⁵³⁴ As discussed above, a better explanation is that Maliki needed to put an end to Sadr’s threat to his governing coalition and to test the loyalty of the Iraqi Security Forces. U.S. officials continued to underestimate these internal political challenges, reflected former senior White House and Defense officials.⁵³⁵ Maliki’s political strategy focused on consolidating his power among the Shi’a parties as the Americans were busy co-opting Sunni Arab tribes. With his base secure, he could take on the perceived Ba’athist threat. Roughly fifteen months after the Surge began, violence levels had plummeted from a high of 1800 per week to roughly 400 per week. They would decline to under 200 per week in 2010.

Some key problems remained unaddressed that would undermine efforts to successfully conclude the war in Iraq. First, was the continued lack of a coordinated strategy between the United States and Iraq.⁵³⁶ Lute argued that this masked divergent interests and objectives, which gave Maliki more space for his sectarian agenda.⁵³⁷ The Bush administration focused on milestones but underappreciated how these were being manipulated by Iraqi elites. This problem heightened, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, after Petraeus and Crocker left Iraq.

Second, while more assertive efforts by Petraeus and Crocker curbed some of Maliki’s sectarian tendencies, they were unsuccessful in changing his political calculus and its effect on Iraqi institutions. An independent commission led by Marine Corps General James L. Jones sent to investigate the Iraqi Security Forces offered a scathing review of the Interior Ministry and found the Iraqi National Police to be so professionally compromised that they should be

⁵³⁴ Interviewees A, D. Gordon and Trainor (2012), 502-3.

⁵³⁵ Interviewees C, K, B.

⁵³⁶ Interview with Douglas E. Lute; Interviewees A, B, and D.

⁵³⁷ Interview with Douglas E. Lute.

disbanded and rebuilt.⁵³⁸ Despite an influx of resources and a new approach to ISF development, the Iraqi Security Forces achieved only temporary gains in readiness and performance.⁵³⁹ The *subjective control* problem was never addressed and sectarianism resumed. As the United States withdrew, recalls Lieutenant General (retired) James Dubik, “Maliki asserted his control over the security forces by assuming the positions of Minister of Defense and Interior, using the Office of the Commander in Chief to sell positions to those he considered to be politically reliable ... and by directing their operations” to advance his sectarian agenda.⁵⁴⁰ The continued alienation of Sunni Arabs fostered the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁵⁴¹ General Petraeus lamented that by 2014 ISIS made “short work of the ISF which were led by individuals I’d insisted be fired back in 2007.”⁵⁴²

Third, there was little thought about how to create a favorable and durable outcome. The surge, explained a key senior advisor, was designed to reverse a declining situation.⁵⁴³ The United States did not address war termination in any formal manner, nor assess the challenges and risks that needed to be addressed. Senior officials acknowledged the concerns about sectarianism and political inclusion, but had no political strategy to advance reconciliation.⁵⁴⁴ In the difficult days of 2007, it is understandable that the U.S. senior leadership in Baghdad

⁵³⁸ General James L. Jones (2007), 17-20.

⁵³⁹ For a detailed discussion of reform efforts see Dubik (2009b).

⁵⁴⁰ Interview with Lieutenant General James Dubik, former head of Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq under Petraeus.

⁵⁴¹ Warrick (2015); Ignatius (2015); McCants (2015).

⁵⁴² Interview with General David H. Petraeus.

⁵⁴³ Interviewee A.

⁵⁴⁴ Interviewees A, B, D, K, O.

was focused on the immense near-term challenges. No one in Washington, D.C. appeared to be looking over the horizon to set the conditions for durable success.⁵⁴⁵

Conclusion

Clausewitz argues that a balance of determination and ability to adapt to circumstances is essential to military genius.⁵⁴⁶ Cognitive bias, entrapment, and loss aversion reinforced the Bush Administration's determination and impeded their ability to learn and adapt. This resulted in the stubborn persistence of a losing strategy. Although the Bush administration had developed metrics to assess progress, the most virulent, strategically damaging problems were intangible or difficult to measure. These included factors such as the political scrimmage for power, predatory sectarianism, and growing corruption. These normally occurred along the seams and fault lines of bureaucratic silos, so were never properly measured or considered in assessments of strategic risk. The absence of such considerations may have played a role in the willingness of the Bush administration to discount violence levels as strategically relevant.

Bush took a bold decision for the surge, but American public support for the war had deteriorated substantially from 2003 to 2007. 72 percent of Americans surveyed by Pew in March 2003 believed that going to war in Iraq was the right decision. 22 percent were opposed. By February 2005, opinions for and against were tied at 47 percent. By February 2008, despite clear and publicly-recognized positive results from the surge, opposition to the war grew to fifty-four percent. Only thirty-eight percent remained supportive. Even though perceptions of how well the war was going improved from March 2007 to February 2008, a greater percentage

⁵⁴⁵ Interviewees A, B, D, K.

⁵⁴⁶ Clausewitz (1984), 100-112.

of Americans still wanted to bring troops home as soon as possible rather than keep them in Iraq until the situation stabilized.⁵⁴⁷

War fatigue had clearly set in among the American public and had become a divisive issue. During the 2008 presidential election, huge majorities of Democratic Party voters and fifty-three percent of Independents favored bringing troops home from Iraq, while large percentages of Republican voters wanted to keep them in. By contrast, sixty-one percent of American's polled supported keeping troops in Afghanistan, to include majorities in both parties and among Independents.⁵⁴⁸ Tapping into such sentiments, Democratic Party nominee Barack Obama campaigned on a promise to wind down the war in Iraq within 16 months and re-focus American energy on the war in Afghanistan.⁵⁴⁹ Although the economy was by far the number one reason Americans voted how they did in 2008, the Iraq war was second.⁵⁵⁰ Obama won the Presidency and made good on his promise to end the war. The last convoy of American forces left Iraq on 18 December 2011.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁷ *Pew Research Center* (19 March 2008).

⁵⁴⁸ *Pew Research Center* (24 September 2008).

⁵⁴⁹ Obama (14 July 2008); *Washington Post*, January 20, 2010.

⁵⁵⁰ *CNN Election Center* (4 November 2008).

⁵⁵¹ Logan (18 December 2011).

Chapter 5: Ending the War in Iraq

The United States rejected early bargaining opportunities with former Saddam-regime officials in 2003 and unwittingly encouraged sectarian violence.⁵⁵² Until 2007 U.S. officials, often at the urging of Shi'a leaders, ignored or blocked opportunities to negotiate with Sunni leaders willing to turn on al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). As noted above, the U.S. surge emphasized the importance of reconciliation – the increased troop levels combined with Sunni Arab Awakening resulted in steep reductions in violence.⁵⁵³ U.S. officials, however, may have misread Sunni intentions believing that the latter were supporting the Iraqi government instead of allying with the Americans for survival against the two-fold threats of AQI and the Maliki government.⁵⁵⁴ The U.S. missed opportunities to foster and incentivize genuine political inclusion.⁵⁵⁵ The Iraqi government's sectarianism and corruption undermined the transition method of war termination.

The United States, by this time, tired of the war. Maliki backed the Obama timeline.⁵⁵⁶ Negotiations under these circumstances would cede significant amounts of leverage to the Iraqis. The Obama Administration's determination to withdraw may have led Maliki to more aggressively consolidate Shi'a political dominance – the small American presence envisioned by Obama would be a political liability without the benefit of protecting against a Sunni resurgence.⁵⁵⁷ Maliki's renewed efforts to marginalize Sunnis led to the growth of the Islamic

⁵⁵² Gordon & Trainor (2012), 21-26; 184-189.

⁵⁵³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 369-388.

⁵⁵⁴ Boghani (29 July 2014).

⁵⁵⁵ US CENTCOM Commander Admiral Fox Fallon argued in June 2007 to reduce presence in Iraq due to failures to advance reconciliation, among other issues (Gates (2014) 68-70)

⁵⁵⁶ *Reuters* (19 July 2008).

⁵⁵⁷ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 673-688.

State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁵⁵⁸ The group emerged from the remnants of AQI and newly disaffected Sunni tribes.⁵⁵⁹ ISIS took over the city of Mosul and much of northern and western Iraq in summer 2014 as American trained Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) fled, leaving large quantities of U.S. military equipment, including tanks.⁵⁶⁰ In 2015, President Obama ordered American advisors back into Iraq.⁵⁶¹

The Surge Misunderstood: Why did the United States fail to achieve desired outcomes?

Most recent scholarship views the surge as a military success but political failure.⁵⁶² The reasons for the military success range from US-centric⁵⁶³ (new troops, new doctrine, new strategy) to Awakening-centric⁵⁶⁴ to synergy between the surge and Sons of Iraq.⁵⁶⁵ This debate matters, Stephen Biddle argues, because if policy-makers adopt a US-centric view of the significant reduction in Iraq violence, they are likely to apply the same methodology elsewhere. If, however, key political conditions on the ground interacted synergistically with the surge, as Biddle suggests, then a US-centric template will be necessary but not sufficient in other

⁵⁵⁸ Wicken (May 2013), Lewis (April 2014).

⁵⁵⁹ McCants (2015); Warrick (2015); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 230.

⁵⁶⁰ Lewis (2014)

⁵⁶¹ Gordon and Davis (June 10, 2015).

⁵⁶² Some contend even the military success was illusory, arguing that ethnic cleansing had been so successful that there were simply fewer targets for sectarian rivals to attack. See Weidmann and Salehyan (2013); Korb, et al (2008). For a compelling refutation of this argument see Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro (2012), 7–40.

⁵⁶³ Kagan (2009); McCain and Lieberman, (10 January 2008); Boot (3 May 2008; Crider (2009), 81– 88. Petraeus (29 October 2013); Robinson (2008); Baker (28 April 2009).

⁵⁶⁴ Long (2008), 67–94; Simon (2008), 57–76; Marc Lynch (2007); Jim Michaels (2010); Daniel R. Green (2010), 591–609.

⁵⁶⁵ Biddle et al (2012), pp. 7–40; Biddle (2008); Gates (2014) 51; Biddle, O’Hanlon, and Pollack (2008), 40–58; Kahl (2008), 151–154, also credits congressional threats of withdrawal; Malkasian (2007) 120–126; Mansoor (2013), 266.

conflicts.⁵⁶⁶ These arguments will prove crucial, as we will see in Chapter 7, when a surge for Afghanistan was debated in 2009 and 2010.

The substantial reduction in violence, however, was not accompanied by greater political inclusion. Outlining the goals of the new Iraq strategy, President Bush argued, “A successful strategy for Iraq goes beyond military operations. Ordinary Iraqi citizens must see that military operations are accompanied by visible improvements in their neighborhoods and communities.” A successful Iraq, he continued, would be “a functioning democracy that polices its territory, upholds the rule of law, respects fundamental human liberties, and answers to its people.”⁵⁶⁷ General David H. Petraeus saw reconciliation as critical for success, “Beyond securing the people by living with them, foremost among the elements of the new strategy was promoting reconciliation between disaffected Sunni Arabs and our forces — and then with the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government.”⁵⁶⁸ Understanding why political reconciliation failed is crucial in assessing war termination in Iraq.

The main explanations for the failure of political reconciliation and achieving a durable outcome center mainly on Maliki’s sectarianism and Obama’s inability to secure an agreement to extend U.S. troop presence beyond the end of 2011.⁵⁶⁹ These were key factors, but the criticisms merit further examination. The first criticism largely exonerates the U.S. government from any substantive role in promoting durable political inclusion. Why leave such a critical element of the war completely in the hands of the Iraqi government? The second argument

⁵⁶⁶ Biddle et al (2012), pp. 9-10, 36-40.

⁵⁶⁷ George W. Bush (10 January 2007). See also Mansoor (2013), p. 260-274.

⁵⁶⁸ Petraeus (29 October 2013)

⁵⁶⁹ Petraeus (29 October 2013); Keck (13 June 2014); Beinart (September 2015); Mansoor (2013), p. 269; Sky (2015); Phillips (3 June 2015); See also *Politico* (July/August 2015); Ignatius (2015); Jeff Gerth/ProPublica and Warrick (August 15, 2016).

assumes that a lengthier military presence would have eventually led to political reform and reconciliation. Did either administration have a political strategy to advance reconciliation that could address the chronic patron-client problems outlined in the previous chapter?

Despite the reduction in violence, the U.S. was unsuccessful in fostering a durable political outcome in Iraq for three inter-locking reasons. First, the U.S. desire to withdraw to zero or to what was perceived by Iraqi leaders as an ineffectual presence reduced American bargaining leverage. Unless the United States could provide sufficiently compelling incentives for reform and reconciliation, Iraqi leaders would be unwilling to make painful sacrifices only to see the Americans depart. Second, the success of the surge in reducing violence led U.S. officials to under appreciate the risk of new sectarian violence and to over-estimate Maliki's inclusiveness, resulting in a major shift in priorities under the Obama Administration. Third, U.S. leverage was further dissipated by civil-military tensions and strategic incoherence in theater, making the coordinated and nuanced application of leverage nearly impossible. As problems were kicked upstairs to Washington DC, the National Security Council was often required to deal with highly complicated problems which its officials had little bandwidth to navigate successfully. The result was often ham-fisted efforts that had unintended consequences.

The Absence of a Political Strategy Erodes U.S. Leverage

Iraq differs from Afghanistan (and Vietnam) in the absence of negotiations with the insurgency or its third-party sponsor. While reconciliation efforts during the Sunni Awakening entailed negotiation, those were primarily tactical in nature aimed at facilitating revolt against AQI in exchange for a cease-fire with U.S. forces and protection from pro-government predation.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁷⁰ Hull (2009); Mansoor (2013), 86.

The U.S. assumed implicitly that the Iraqis would win a political victory over AQI and the Sunni and Sadrist insurgencies, particularly as violence levels reduced so substantially in the fall of 2007.⁵⁷¹ The surge and Awakening, however, largely failed to lead to national reconciliation and broader political inclusion.⁵⁷² While the Iraqis would need to make sustainable arrangements for political inclusion, the United States was not powerless to advance the prospects. The warning signs that were present that Prime Minister Maliki remained oriented on his sectarian agenda, but the U.S. took an increasingly passive stance. In fact, the U.S. had three significant opportunities to apply leverage for political reform and reconciliation: the 2008 Strategic Framework (SFA) and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiations, the 2010 parliamentary elections, and the 2011 SOFA negotiations. It failed to do so each time.

The surge in Iraq was intended as a time-limited force uplift.⁵⁷³ President Bush made a bold decision to “double-down” on success in Iraq, but had only a year left in office. Both competitors for the Democrat party nomination, Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama campaigned to end the war in Iraq (the so-called “war of choice”) and reinvest in Afghanistan (the so-called “war of necessity”).⁵⁷⁴ General David H. Petraeus, taking command of Multinational Forces – Iraq in February 2007, had about seven months to make demonstrable progress before his Congressional testimony in September of that year. If successful, he and Secretary of Defense Bob Gates believed that they could probably fend off demands for a more rapid withdrawal timeline.⁵⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the United Nations Security Council Resolution that

⁵⁷¹ Interviewees B and C.

⁵⁷² Petraeus (29 October 2013); Boghani (29 July 2014)

⁵⁷³ Gates (2014), 38-57.

⁵⁷⁴ Clinton (17 March 2008; Shanker, (3 December 2008)

⁵⁷⁵ Petraeus (29 October 2013); Mansoor (2013), 208-230; Gates (2014), 49-50;

provided the international legal basis for American military presence in Iraq was due to expire at the end of 2008 and not likely to be renewed.⁵⁷⁶ Without a new framework in place, the U.S. mission would be even more tenuous. The Bush Administration wanted to keep American troops in Iraq, while Iraqi leaders sought an agreement that had greater respect for their sovereignty. The agreed way forward was to negotiate a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to govern U.S. military presence, and a Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) to outline the bi-lateral diplomatic, economic, and cultural relationship. The negotiations began in March 2008.

Maliki sought to increase his leverage as the withdrawal timelines became a political football during the 2008 U.S. Presidential election campaign. By the time presumptive Democrat nominee Barack Obama visited Petraeus in Iraq in July 2008, U.S. forces had been steadily drawing down for the past eight months.⁵⁷⁷ Obama campaigned for a 16 month timeline to withdraw troops from Iraq, which Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki endorsed during an interview with *Der Spiegel* earlier in the month.⁵⁷⁸ That Maliki's remarks occurred during the SFA and SOFA negotiations was probably no accident.⁵⁷⁹ Despite the steep reductions in violence, American military presence remained deeply unpopular in Iraq.⁵⁸⁰ With AQI decimated and the Sadrist militia defeated during Charge of the Knights, Maliki's worries shifted to fears of a Ba'athist coup.⁵⁸¹ He was looking toward the 2010 parliamentary elections to solidify his grip

⁵⁷⁶ United Nations (18 December 2007) renews UNSCR 1790.

⁵⁷⁷ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 530-9;

⁵⁷⁸ SPIEGEL Interview with Iraqi Leader Nouri al-Maliki (19 July 2008). American forces, said Maliki, should withdraw "As soon as possible, as far as we're concerned. U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama talks about 16 months. That, we think, would be the right timeframe for a withdrawal, with the possibility of slight changes."

⁵⁷⁹ Balz (22 July 2008); Weigant (10 September 2008); *Associated Press* (21 July 2008);

⁵⁸⁰ U.S. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 23 November 2008, Beinart (September 2015)

⁵⁸¹ Interviewee B.

on power.⁵⁸² The Americans were a good hedge against a feared Ba'athist resurgence until the Iraqi Security Forces could take on the task of internal security. Petraeus forecasted this would occur by the end of 2011.⁵⁸³ Internationally, Maliki indicated to U.S. officials that he suspected the Gulf Arab states were fomenting instability in Iraq. Iran, he believed, had been largely helpful.⁵⁸⁴ Iran also had leverage over the Sadrists, which could be useful in the elections.⁵⁸⁵ Securing a withdrawal timeline from the Americans would bolster Maliki's chances of re-election, improve his status with Iran, and give him greater leverage over the Sunni Arabs and Kurds.⁵⁸⁶ Stipulating the need for Parliamentary approval of the SOFA would also likely win him support, improve his bargaining position regarding the withdrawal timeline, and distribute the risk as widely as possible.⁵⁸⁷ Once Maliki had heard from Defense Secretary Gates that the U.S. had no "Plan B" to keep troops in Iraq without a SOFA, he could stand firm and resist unwelcome provisions.⁵⁸⁸ He had everything to gain by securing the timeline and nothing to lose, as long as he left an opening in case things turned sour before the Americans departed.

⁵⁸² Interviewees A and B; Robertson and Maher (17 December 2008); Nordlund (27 March 2010); Ignatius (13 October 2006).

⁵⁸³ Maliki explored plans in July 2008 for downsizing the ISF, potentially to reduce influence of potential opponents. See Embassy Baghdad Cable, 24 July 2009. Gordon & Trainor (2012), p. 539.

⁵⁸⁴ Embassy Baghdad Cables, 22 May 2007 and 17 April 2008; Blanchard, (2008); Embassy Doha Cable, 18 December 2007; For the Saudi Arabian government position, as told to U.S. officials, see Embassy Riyadh Cables, 20 April 2008, and 6 August 2008; Robert Kennedy (9 September 2011); for Kuwaiti government views see Embassy Kuwait Cable, 29 October 2008.

⁵⁸⁵ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 25 March 2008; Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali (April 2011).

⁵⁸⁶ Interviewees B and K. For growing tensions with the Kurds see Embassy Baghdad Cables, 21 September 2008, 23 September 2008, 1 November 2008, and 11 January 2008.

⁵⁸⁷ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 29 August 2008a.

⁵⁸⁸ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 21 September 2008.

The Bush Administration, meanwhile, wanted a withdrawal framework based on the security conditions as the U.S. interpreted them, specifically the levels of violence and the capabilities of the Iraqi security forces.⁵⁸⁹ President Bush had faced down the Democrats on that issue, having vetoed a 2007 war-spending bill that included a withdrawal timeline.⁵⁹⁰ Agreeing to one now would be a loss of face, but Bush was by nature less wary of audience costs and was moving toward the last year of his Presidency. Giving way on the timeline to keep troops in Iraq until the end of 2011, when Petraeus forecasted the ISF would be ready to handle security, was deemed an acceptable outcome.⁵⁹¹ Notably, the conditions did not include political reform and reconciliation – which Bush had established as a key goal of the surge.⁵⁹²

The U.S. side began the effort in disarray with Departmental disagreements.⁵⁹³ Without an interagency strategic headquarters on the ground, the disagreements and the negotiations had to be managed by the NSC. Deputy National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley initially allowed Defense to negotiate the SOFA separately, not wanting to create interagency friction. over the matter, but U.S. leverage was likely to be much higher if the SOFA and broader Strategic Framework Agreement (that the Iraqis keenly wanted) were tied together. The Iraqi government valued U.S. economic and diplomatic support more than troop presence. Separating the two allowed the Iraqis to stick to their guns on the timeline without suffering economic or diplomatic penalties – or having to make painful political concessions. After three

⁵⁸⁹ The White House (21 July 2008); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 529-532; DeYoung and Raghavan (22 August 2008); Barnes and Richter (19 July 2008).

⁵⁹⁰ *CNN* (2 May 2007).

⁵⁹¹ Gates (2014), 51-2

⁵⁹² See U.S. Department of State, Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq, January 10, 2007; Petraeus (29 October 2013); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 585.

⁵⁹³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), p. 532-5.

months of stalled negotiations by the Defense team, the SOFA negotiations were handed over to State.⁵⁹⁴ The Iraqis maintained their position that a timeline must be included.

As the negotiations dragged on, Maliki insisted U.S. forces be out of Iraq's cities by early 2009 and completely out of Iraq by the end of 2010.⁵⁹⁵ This aligned with democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's timeline. Administration officials interviewed by Gordon and Trainor claim that Crocker asked for guidance on 29 July from Bush. The latter wanted to avoid concrete deadlines. The President reportedly replied that he could only accept the end of 2011 as a withdrawal timeline and preferred an "as soon as possible" (as defined by the U.S.) construct regarding withdrawal from Iraqi cities. In a video teleconference (VTC) with Maliki the next day, Bush reportedly offered mid-2009 to be out of the cities and the end of 2011 as a "goal" for removing U.S. troops. Maliki agreed, but cautioned that his government could still reject the 2011 date.⁵⁹⁶ For Maliki, getting Americans forces out of the cities showed progress on sovereignty, and increased his freedom of action to deal with perceived internal security threats. A former senior White House official close to the negotiations recalled that Maliki even wanted to rename the annex on troop withdrawal to "Retreat of Coalition forces from Iraq."⁵⁹⁷

Wanting to conclude the agreement as soon as possible, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice went to Baghdad to try to nail down the remaining issues in a one-on-one discussion with Maliki. She believed they had come to a final agreement that included a residual force of 40,000

⁵⁹⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), p. 528. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 10 July 2008.

⁵⁹⁵ Gates (2014), 235-6.

⁵⁹⁶ Gordon & Trainor (2012), p. 539-40.

⁵⁹⁷ Interviewee K.

U.S. troops to assist Iraqi forces with training and logistics after 2011.⁵⁹⁸ If so, this would have been a major concession from Maliki who had been consistent about wanting all U.S. forces out of the country. It was also a concession he was unable to promise unilaterally and one that would likely be rejected by the Iraqi Parliament.

When Bush met with Iraqi President Talabani on September 10 in the Oval Office, the latter was adamant that without a SOFA, U.S. forces must leave. Bush agreed to the end of June 2009 to be out of Iraqi cities and December 31, 2011, for withdrawing all American forces from Iraq.⁵⁹⁹ The U.S. caved on the deadline. Bush recognized that three years was the best he was going to get, confided a senior White House official close to the negotiations.⁶⁰⁰ The Iraqi Parliament approved the SOFA on November 27, 149 in favor, 35 opposed, 14 abstentions, and 77 not present.⁶⁰¹

As important as political reconciliation supposedly was to American interests, it did not figure into any of the SOFA discussions.⁶⁰² The U.S. made no effort to trade timelines for progress on reconciliation and political reform.⁶⁰³ The absence of a political strategy and a coordinated

⁵⁹⁸ Condoleeza Rice (2011), 694-5. Rice complained that Maliki reneged as soon as Rice returned to Washington.

⁵⁹⁹ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 541; Gates (2014), 236-7. According to Gates, Petraeus reported that an Iranian brigadier general had been arrested for bribing Iraqi officials with \$250,000 each to vote against the SOFA (Gates (2014), 236).

⁶⁰⁰ Interviewee K

⁶⁰¹ "Iraqi Parliament Approves Status-of-forces Agreement Setting Timetable for U.S. Withdrawal". The American Journal of International Law 103.1 (2009): 132-135; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 558; Rubin and Robertson (28 November 2008).

⁶⁰² A revised de-baathification law and a law governing the distribution of oil revenues were among the US Congressional benchmarks for Iraq in term of Iraqi national reconciliation (Gates (2014), 60, 231), but the causal linkage between the laws and durable political conclusion are highly suspect. Beehner and Bruno (11 March 2008).

⁶⁰³ Nonetheless, Iraqi Vice President Tariq Hashimi, a Sunni Arab, threatened to veto the SOFA, which led to unspecified resolutions for reform in the Council of Representatives (CoR), Embassy Baghdad Cable, 18 March 2009a.

U.S. – Iraq strategy undermined the ability of the Bush administration to set the condition for durable success and to hold Maliki accountable for reforms. Maliki, meanwhile, was taking steps to consolidate power, using ISF as a “political targeting force.”⁶⁰⁴

The U.S. leadership changed in 2009. Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, and General Ray Odierno replaced Petraeus as the U.S. commander in Iraq. To bring the new Administration up to speed, Odierno and Crocker prepared an assessment of the situation in Iraq. Notably, according to interviews of participants by Gordon and Trainor, the U.S. team in Baghdad cautioned against conditioning troop withdrawal (which had already been agreed in the SOFA) to political progress, “While our military presence is key for the large issue of guaranteeing an environment for progress in the political process, it does not predetermine the outcome of that process.”⁶⁰⁵ U.S. forces had been successful in diffusing a number of potential ethnic and sectarian flashpoints; losing that capacity entailed strategic risk. However, the U.S. had no strategy for advancing political reconciliation beyond crisis management, meetings, and encouraging pieces of legislation.⁶⁰⁶

Perhaps most significantly to diplomatic continuity, Ambassador Ryan Crocker departed. In one of his final cables, Crocker highlighted Maliki’s use of Iraqi special operations forces as tools of repression. “Maliki has shown that he is either unwilling or unable to take the lead in the give-and-take needed to build broad consensus for the Government’s policies among competing power blocks.” A key question, Crocker posed, was whether Maliki was becoming “a nondemocratic dictator” or was “attempting to rebalance political and security authority back to the center...” Hedging his answer, Crocker believed “the answer lies closer to the latter

⁶⁰⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 542-8; Interviewees O, A, D.

⁶⁰⁵ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 569-70.

⁶⁰⁶ Interviewees K, D.

than to the former.” He recommended that the United States “press the PM [Prime Minister Maliki] on institution and political consensus building as key to sustaining and advancing our relationship and support.”⁶⁰⁷ Crocker, one of the most talented and accomplished Ambassadors in modern American history, had just highlighted the absence of a strategy to advance political reform and reconciliation. To an Administration official reading the cable, the message is to stay the course and to keep encouraging Maliki to be more inclusive.

No doubt this was the message conveyed by Crocker to his successor. Ambassador Chris Hill had a distinguished career and most recently had been the U.S. negotiator with North Korea over their nuclear weapons program. Hill was reportedly determined to be the “un-Crocker.”⁶⁰⁸ He brought in his own team, all with strong diplomatic records but little to no experience in the region. Hill was also determined to redefine the civ-mil relationship. Petraeus and Crocker were seen to be “joined at the hip” – a relationship experts and former officials from both the Bush and Obama administrations believed was instrumental in preventing Maliki’s worst tendencies.⁶⁰⁹ Hill reportedly wanted the Embassy to stop acting as an “adjunct to the military” and show that the diplomats were really in charge.⁶¹⁰ Whereas Crocker was skeptical of Maliki’s intentions and would pester him about reform, Hill enthused to Vice President Biden of the PM’s intention to build a broad-based cross-sectarian alliance.⁶¹¹ Such efforts were blocked, he assessed, by Sunni and Kurdish rivals who refused to get on board with Maliki’s

⁶⁰⁷ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 13 February 2009. Quoted in Gordon & Trainor (2012), 586.

⁶⁰⁸ Gordon and Trainor (2012), p. 582.

⁶⁰⁹ Interviewees A, B, C, D, K; Biddle (2016), 34; Fred Kaplan (2013), 263-4, 341

⁶¹⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 581-6; Brennan et al (2013), 77-78; Ricks (28 September 2009).

⁶¹¹ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 12 September 2009, See also Embassy Baghdad Cable, 16 October 2009b.

inclusive agenda.⁶¹² Hill assessed in January 2010 that the Arab-Kurdish divide, not the sectarian conflict, was the “greatest remaining challenge for the U.S. effort in Iraq.”⁶¹³

New Administration; Similar Challenges

The Obama Administration embarked quickly on a strategy review for Iraq, determined to forge a new way forward to wind down the war and refocus attention on Afghanistan.⁶¹⁴ When the review was completed and a new policy approved, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued new guidance to Embassy-Baghdad in 8 April 2009 a cable entitled, “U.S. Policy on Political Engagement in Iraq.”⁶¹⁵ It outlined six “critical” objectives: successful national elections; avoid violent Kurd-Arab confrontation; develop non-sectarian, politically neutral, and more capable security forces; avoid Sunni-GOI (Government of Iraq) breakdown; prevent government paralysis; and maintain macro-economic stability. After noting some less critical objectives, the cable articulated a “new way forward based on a “grand process(es)” policy that “focuses on setting in motion and energizing productive processes, but not necessarily resolution, on the full range of critical and significant challenges.” The United States, it directed, “Will offer to play the role of honest broker and/or third-party guarantor of the Iraqi and U.N. reconciliation processes.” This engagement would address five issues, focused primarily on the Kurdish-Arab frictions. It would support U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) efforts to address disputed internal boundaries; an election law specific to Kirkuk; and passage of a hydrocarbon

⁶¹² Embassy Baghdad Cable, 27 January 2010. Gordon & Trainor (2012), 597.

⁶¹³ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 20 January 2010.

⁶¹⁴ A similar strategy review for Afghanistan and Pakistan was ongoing concurrently.

⁶¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. POLICY ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN IRAQ,” 8 April 2009.

law; and would sustain a MNF-I coordinating committee with ISF and Peshmerga leaders. The fifth issue was Sunni Arab accommodation.

Due in part to the Administration's shift in strategic priority to Afghanistan, the cable offered no resources or new authorities. "To carry out this policy, the Embassy and MNF-I are encouraged to reconfigure resources to support the five major processes (listed below) and to formalize an Embassy/MNF-I/UNAMI Working Group (including other parties as necessary) to coordinate these efforts." Embassy-Iraq was directed to advance U.S. objectives through meetings, working groups, and support to UNAMI. With no authority over the military mission, the Embassy could not direct MNF-I efforts or resources; the latter was free to implement U.S. policy guidance as it saw fit. The cable did not direct Embassy-Baghdad to devise an implementation strategy or outline ways to use existing U.S. leverage to advance its objectives. The guidance cable stated its desire not to limit or constrain the mission. "Indeed, creative and responsible initiatives from the field that effectively advance the stated policy are encouraged when appropriately proposed and approved (emphasis added)." In other words, the Embassy was permitted no latitude without express approval from Washington D.C. Ambassador Hill found that the easiest way to advance Iraqi agreement on the non-military aspects of the policy was to pressure the Kurds and Sunni Arabs to accommodate Maliki's demands, rather than the reverse.⁶¹⁶

The most likely explanation for the major emphasis on the Arab-Kurd frictions was its recent intensity coupled with a belief that enough reconciliation of Sunni Arabs to the Shi'a-dominated government was occurring to substantially lower the relative risk of a resurgent Sunni Arab insurgency.⁶¹⁷ The cable mentions areas of potential backsliding on the part of the

⁶¹⁶ Interviewee A, C, D; Sky (2015), xi.

⁶¹⁷ Interview C; Embassy Baghdad Reporting Cable, 19 March 2009; Boghani (29 July 2014).

Iraqi government on reconciliation, but orients on managing Sunni reactions: “Sunni political leadership is deeply fractured, rendering them more likely to advocate unhelpful, extreme stances, particularly during an election year. If mistrust grows it could push Sunni Arabs out of the Iraqi national government and push more hardline Sunni Arabs towards a resumption of violence.” There was no mention in the cable of exploring ways that the U.S. might capitalize on the elections or apply other leverage on the Iraqi government to advance reconciliation.⁶¹⁸ There was also no suggestion of any future SOFA negotiations. The major change in emphasis that resulted from an Obama Administration strategy review presumably benefitted from substantial inputs and concurrence by both the Departments of State and Defense as well as the Intelligence Community on the status of reconciliation and the highest risks to success. The guidance sent by the Secretary of State to the U.S. Embassy reflected the Administration’s policy decision – the same decision upon which the Secretary of Defense would issue guidance to U.S. Central Command and MNF-I.

Despite Hill’s upbeat view of Maliki and the Administration’s decreased attention to Sunni Arab reconciliation, the Iraqi Prime Minister continued efforts to weaken Sunni leadership.⁶¹⁹ With al Qaeda in Iraq decimated, violence declining, and U.S. forces leaving the cities, Maliki had a freer hand to reduce the power of the 100,000-member Sons of Iraq (SoI).⁶²⁰ He began to slowly dismantle the Sunni volunteers, after some initial efforts at U.S. insistence to support them. In the fall of 2008, following pressure from Odierno, Maliki agreed to continue paying the salaries of 60,000 members and incorporate 40,000 into the ISF. The first tranche of

⁶¹⁸ In a 16 October 2009 cable to Ambassador Susan Rice, Hill discussed reconciliation only in the context of a \$225 million program focused on community leaders. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 16 October 2009a.

⁶¹⁹ Embassy Baghdad Cables, 29 August 2008c, 13 March 2009, 4 February 2010b.

⁶²⁰ Interviewees A, C, and D; Embassy Baghdad Cable, 2 August 2008. Maliki began developing “Support Councils” as a rival political organizations to SOI, likely to improve grassroots mobilization in advance of the elections. Embassy Baghdad Cables, 28 November 2008 and 29 August 2008b.

volunteers went onto the government payrolls in October without incident.⁶²¹ When a budget dispute erupted, Maliki took money from the Ministry of Interior budget to pay the SoI groups. In March 2009, however, he started arresting Awakening leaders.⁶²² One such leader predicted to a U.S. official that the government would, “arrest all of us, one by one.”⁶²³ Then the Iraqi government stopped or substantially delayed paying member salaries. An Awakening member who wanted a job in the ISF had to navigate volumes of red tape, only to be offered menial janitorial or servant positions. Sunnis in the mixed-sectarian Diyala province, east of Baghdad, were targeted disproportionately in for alleged terrorist activities.⁶²⁴

Meanwhile, al Qaeda in Iraq was morphing into an underground organization, later to become the so-called Islamic State. “A few embers of Zarqawi’s Islamic state remained, kept alive by flickering Sunni rage,” writes David Ignatius, “The flame was nurtured at U.S.-organized Iraqi prisons such as Camp Bucca, where religious Sunni detainees mingled with former members of Saddam’s Baath Party, and the nucleus of a reborn movement took shape.”⁶²⁵ They were also taking aim at Awakening leaders. Former army officer and battalion commander in Iraq Craig Whiteside, now a professor at the Naval Post Graduate School, counts 1345 Awakening members killed by Islamic State between 2009 and 2013.⁶²⁶ “Was anyone watching in Washington? Evidently not,” Ignatius argues. “Officials in Baghdad, meanwhile, didn’t seem

⁶²¹ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 591.

⁶²² Embassy Baghdad Cable, 30 March 2009.

⁶²³ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 18 May 2009, quoted in Gordon & Trainor (2012), 591.

⁶²⁴ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 20 February 2010 and 27 August 2009; Gordon & Trainor (2012), 592.

⁶²⁵ Ignatius (2015).

⁶²⁶ Whiteside (5 November 2014).

to care; Maliki's government was probably as happy to see the killing of potentially powerful Sunnis as was ISIS.”⁶²⁷

In Baghdad, Hill orchestrated Maliki's visit to Washington in July 2009. If political reform was important to the Ambassador and the Obama Administration, it should have featured prominently in the churn of cables and talking points that go into scripting head of state visits.⁶²⁸ Maliki wanted to use the visit to launch the Strategic Framework Agreement.⁶²⁹ Hill suggested in his cable to Washington that the Administration advance the economic discussion, help facilitate a resolution to decades-long frictions with neighboring Kuwait, and encourage Maliki to visit Arlington National Cemetery to honor American sacrifices in Iraq. The cable is silent on reform and reconciliation, painting Maliki as a post-sectarian leader.⁶³⁰ In the event, Maliki pressed the Iranian threat. If the United States could not get Sunni Arab states to stop fomenting unrest among Iraq's Sunnis, he reportedly cautioned, then Iran was likely to intervene more aggressively in Iraqi politics. He also protested that representatives of the coalition military met with exiled Baathists in Turkey.⁶³¹ If conditionality for political reform was on the Obama agenda, it apparently never surfaced.

The next major opportunity for the U.S. to shape political progress arose during the 2010 Parliamentary elections. In the lead-up to the elections, Maliki aimed to outmaneuver his

⁶²⁷ Ignatius (2015); Whiteside (2014).

⁶²⁸ Political reconciliation was not mentioned at all, according to the Cable reporting about the Secretary of State's 24 July meeting with Maliki. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 30 July 2009. The issue was not mentioned in a scene-setter to Vice President Biden in advance of his September 2009 trip to Iraq, Embassy Baghdad Cable (12 September 2009).

⁶²⁹ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 22 May 2009.

⁶³⁰ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 16 July 2009.

⁶³¹ These were representatives of the Strategic Engagement Cell in MNF-I, who facilitated reconciliation efforts between insurgents and the coalition military. Gordon & Trainor (2012), 597-8.

potential opponents.⁶³² By securing a withdrawal timeline, he showed his ability to advance Iraqi sovereignty and demonstrate political independence from the Americans.⁶³³ He worked to marginalize Sadrists and other rival Shi'a parties while using his security forces to keep Sunnis off balance and in political disarray.⁶³⁴ He also aimed to undermine their campaigns. Shi'a candidates deployed sometimes graphic anti-Ba'athist themes in efforts to increase Shi'a turn out.⁶³⁵ Vice President Hashimi, a Sunni, meanwhile, threatened to veto the election law in hopes of gaining Sunni Arab seats from the Kurds. U.S. President Obama intervened successfully to pressure Kurdish President Barzani to accept the law.⁶³⁶ Despite the fractious political maneuvering, all seemed on track as the US Embassy expressed confidence in the Iraqi High Election Commission (IHEC).⁶³⁷ That confidence shattered in January 2010 when the Accountability and Justice Commission (formerly the de-Ba'athification commission) barred roughly 500 candidates for Parliament, mostly Sunni, over alleged Ba'athist ties.⁶³⁸ Hill

⁶³² Gates (2014), 471; Embassy Baghdad Cable, 13 January 2010; For a good overview of Iraq's Presidency Council and Council of Ministers, see Embassy Baghdad Cable, 16 March 2009.

⁶³³ See, for instance, comments by Shi'a political leader in Embassy Baghdad Cables, 28 February and 11 June 2009.

⁶³⁴ Embassy Baghdad Cables, 22 February 2010, 18 February 2010, 7 February 2010, 8 February 2010b, 11 February 2010, 13 February 2010, and 12 September 2009. For a detailed description of Shi'a political parties see Embassy Baghdad Cable, 18 March 2009b.

⁶³⁵ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 22 February 2010.

⁶³⁶ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 7 December 2009. The Obama Administration was beginning to establish a pattern of extracting Kurdish concessions, which would later create animosity that the latter were being taken for granted. For further discussion on the election law debate see Embassy Baghdad Cable, 12 October 2009 and 24 October 2009.

⁶³⁷ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 8 January 2010, "After two major elections in 2009, IHEC shows more confidence in asserting itself as Iraq's election authority, and commissioners show a serious commitment to IHEC's obligation to educate parties and the public about the electoral process." According to a later cable, the IHEC was overwhelmingly Shi'a in make-up and its employees served for only 2-3 month contracts. They threatened to strike just before the election in hopes of forcing the government to make them full-time civil servants (Embassy Baghdad Cable, 23 December 2009). The short-term contracts and sectarian composition likely heightened the risk of the IHEC being influenced by Maliki and the incumbent government.

⁶³⁸ Embassy Baghdad Cables, 8 January 2010, 18 January 2010, 1 February 2010.

noted the subdued reaction of some Sunni communities to the ruling, and even suggested it may be the “first tangible example of cross-sectarian cooperation.”⁶³⁹ Odierno reportedly took a dimmer view and raised a red flag to Washington. Hill was instructed by the Obama Administration to address the issue with Maliki.⁶⁴⁰ The PM was intransigent.⁶⁴¹ Obama next sent his point-man on Iraq, Vice President Joe Biden, to Baghdad. According to an Embassy reporting cable cleared by Biden’s office, the Vice President noted his two main concerns to UN Special Representative for Iraq Ad Melkert: “that the government had a serious responsibility to continue service delivery during the [post-election] transition, and that it was critical not to waste time during the period of government formation.”⁶⁴² Advancing political reconciliation was absent from the list, and, according to a reporting cable, Biden did not raise the issue with Maliki. The Prime Minister assured Biden that he was not paranoid about Ba’athists, but viewed them as a “malignant virus.” Biden praised Maliki for democratic progress and political consensus, assuring U.S. support while Iraq handled the de-Baathification issue according to its own laws.⁶⁴³ While the Americans were able to get many barred candidates reinstated, the bans had a disruptive effect. Maliki believed his State of Law list would win handily.⁶⁴⁴

⁶³⁹ Embassy Baghdad Cables, 1 February 2010 and 31 January 2010.

⁶⁴⁰ In the event, Sunnis did not boycott the election. See Embassy Baghdad Cable (22 February 2010)

⁶⁴¹ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 15 February 2010, Maliki reportedly insisted Iraqi officials not meet with AMB. Hill due to U.S. concerns over disqualification of candidates under de-Ba’athification law.

⁶⁴² Embassy Baghdad Cable, 6 February 2010.

⁶⁴³ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 8 February 2010c. See also Embassy Baghdad Cables, 2 February 2010 and 8 February 2010a.

⁶⁴⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 607-614.

The U.S. country team was not so sure. Opinion polls suggested a tight race with Ayad Allawi's Iraqiya party—a cross-sectarian Shi'a-Sunni coalition.⁶⁴⁵ Maliki, however, had tools in place to shape the outcome. He had stacked the intelligence and security services with loyalists.⁶⁴⁶ The Accountability and Justice Commission could disqualify winning candidates. He controlled the judiciary and had the executive powers to declare a state of emergency. The U.S. country team consulted with the White House, where, according to Gordon and Trainor's interviews with participants, Odierno pushed for guidance if this scenario came about. "We need a Maliki strategy," Hill reportedly said, "he is the only one with the tools to screw up democracy."⁶⁴⁷ This was a stunning admission by the U.S. Ambassador. If anyone should have developed and briefed a "Maliki strategy" it should have been Hill. Instead, he pushed the matter to Washington officials who were in no position to create it from scratch. Unsurprisingly, the Administration punted.⁶⁴⁸ They were in the final stages of a contentious strategy review for Afghanistan, a higher priority for them than Iraq.

The elections provided yet another golden opportunity to exercise leverage. If the results were to be as close as the polls suggested, a disputed outcome would be likely. According to the Iraq's election law, the party that wins the largest bloc of seats gets the first opportunity to form a government.⁶⁴⁹ Careful American support, one way or another, could tip the balance. Allawi's cross-sectarian coalition was more likely to promote political inclusion, but would need U.S.

⁶⁴⁵ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 614-5.

⁶⁴⁶ Embassy Baghdad Cable, 4 February 2010b. For an example in Anbar, see Embassy Baghdad Cable 4 February 2010a.

⁶⁴⁷ Quoted in Gordon & Trainor (2012), 615.

⁶⁴⁸ Interviewee C. On 25 February Secretary of State Clinton issued an instruction cable to U.S. Embassy-Iraq that listed talking points on the election, urging non-violence, inclusion, and rapid formation of a new government, U.S. Department of State Cable, 25 February 2010.

⁶⁴⁹ Williams and Nordland (26 March 2010); Nordland (27 March 2010).

support in preventing Maliki from using extra-legal or even violent means to stay in power. Hill reportedly believed that Maliki would emerge from the election as PM, whether legally or not.⁶⁵⁰ If that was the Administration's policy, then American acquiescence should have come at a price. Either way, the U.S. had a chance to advance this essential pillar of success.

The results on March 7 were as Odierno guessed. Allawi's secular Iraqiya list won 91 seats to Maliki's State of Law coalition's 89, and narrowly won the popular vote.⁶⁵¹ Iraqi National Alliance (INA), the competing Sadrist Shi'a bloc took seventy seats. INA and State of Law had split because the former did not intend to endorse Maliki for another term. The Kurdish bloc won fifty-seven seats. Maliki was incensed and moved forward aggressively to challenge the results.⁶⁵² Convinced he was cheated and that the UN, which declared the election fair, was complicit, Maliki reportedly sent a letter to the Americans demanding a recount in Baghdad and potentially in Mosul and Kirkuk.⁶⁵³ He also aimed to use de-Baathification. The Accountability and Justice commission would conduct another review of candidates for alleged Baathist ties. Maliki pursued a legal track as well, asking for a ruling on the "largest bloc" language in Article 76 of the constitution. The pro-Maliki judiciary said largest bloc could mean the party that won the most seats or a bloc assembled in parliament after the election.⁶⁵⁴ These efforts gave Maliki the time and the opportunity he needed. If Maliki could gain INA support, he could claim the largest bloc.

⁶⁵⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 615.

⁶⁵¹ Nordland (27 March 2010); Gates (2014), 472.

⁶⁵² Parker and Ahmed (22 March 2010); Nordland (27 March 2010)

⁶⁵³ Sky (2015), 317

⁶⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion see Katzman (1 July 2010).

Odierno, Gordon and Trainor report, argued for the United States to get involved. He supported the Iraqiya case. Hill appeared to be less concerned about a Maliki victory, and believed that the Saudis bankrolled Iraqiya and other Sunni parties.⁶⁵⁵ With no in-country political strategy in place and the Ambassador and Commander in disagreement, the issue would need to be managed in Washington. While Washington considered the contrasting views from the field and deliberated whether and to what extent to get involved, Hill urged Iraq's politicians to start forming a government.⁶⁵⁶

Iran moved more quickly. They invited Iraq's Shi'a politicians to Tehran for Nowruz celebrations and urged them to come together. Although that was not yet agreed, the Shi'a parties on March 22 did support Talabani, who was also in attendance, to remain President.⁶⁵⁷ By early May Iran had convinced State of Law and INA to merge into a single coalition: the National Alliance with Maliki as the head. Together, they tallied 159 seats, just 4 shy of the 163 needed to form a government. Iraqiya sought international support for its right to try to form a government, but nothing of substance was forthcoming.⁶⁵⁸ Meanwhile, on April 26 a special judicial panel upheld a decision by the Accountability and Justice Commission to disqualify fifty-two candidates, one of whom was Iraqiya. Even if Allawi was given the opportunity to form a government, he was highly unlikely to amass the needed majority. With the Shi'a mega-coalition formed and the election outcome safely in Maliki's hands, an Iraqi appeals court overturned the earlier de-Baathification disqualifications. This removed a key obstacle to certifying the election results.⁶⁵⁹ The Obama Administration rationalized that

⁶⁵⁵ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 617-20.

⁶⁵⁶ Interviewee C. Ian Black (26 April 2010). Karadsheh (26 April 2010).

⁶⁵⁷ Spencer (31 March 2010). Nordlund (1 April 2010); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 639-40.

⁶⁵⁸ See Hiltermann (19 August 2010).

⁶⁵⁹ *Reuters* (17 May 2010).

Allawi would have been unlikely to win enough support to form a government anyway, but Iraqiya never got the opportunity to try. Sunnis saw American acquiescence as a betrayal of the democratic process.⁶⁶⁰ Maliki still needed the support of the Kurds to secure the 163-seat majority, and Barzai pushed hard to extract the best price for his support.⁶⁶¹

To complicate matters for the Americans, the country team leadership changed with Odierno being replaced by General Lloyd Austin and James Jeffrey (who served previously in Iraq) taking Hill's place as Ambassador.⁶⁶² The Obama Administration instead tried to bandage the election dispute by supporting a power-sharing arrangement among the rivals. This decision was reportedly made over the objections of James Steinberg, the Deputy Secretary of State, who believed it was more likely to produce gridlock and antagonism.⁶⁶³ The Administration persisted in the approach through the summer and into the fall of 2010. Maliki would remain as PM, but Allawi would get a newly created post called Office of Strategic Policies. Allawi saw the powerlessness in the manufactured position and rejected it. The Americans then sought to promote Allawi as the President, which would mean Talibani would need to step down. This would be a political blow to the Kurds and to Talibani himself, but also a problem for his rival Barzani who did not want him back in Kurdistan.⁶⁶⁴ Various U.S. officials attempted to persuade Talibani to give up the Presidency. He refused. On November 4, the Administration took the extraordinary step of arranging a phone call between Obama and Talibani. The former pressed his fellow sitting President to step down. Talibani refused. The Kurdish leaders felt

⁶⁶⁰ Interviewees A, C, D; Pollack (29 January 2015), 14-15.

⁶⁶¹ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 628-40.

⁶⁶² For Jeffrey's views on the election, see Boghani (29 July 2014)

⁶⁶³ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 634, 643-4.

⁶⁶⁴ Lake (10 November 2010); Gordon & Trainor (2012), 628-635.

taken for granted.⁶⁶⁵ By November 10, with Iran brokering an agreement between Maliki and the Kurds, Allawi likely recognized that the Council for Strategic Policies was the best he would get. He reluctantly accepted, but the arrangement collapsed immediately. The Council was never formed. Allawi never joined the government. Most of Maliki's promises to the Kurds never materialized.⁶⁶⁶

Gates argues that the absence of sectarian violence between rival parties was a "mark of significant progress."⁶⁶⁷ Such an indicator is misleading. Both leading candidates were Shi'a, so sectarian violence between them was unlikely. Maliki could manipulate the law to tilt the scales in his favor. Alawi would need American support if he hoped to form a government. Political violence by his party would have undermined any hopes of securing U.S. backing. By focusing on putting the election crisis in the rear-view mirror, the Administration got nothing for the effort in advancing reform and reconciliation.⁶⁶⁸ In fact, their efforts resulted in greater Sunni Arab and Kurdish resentment. Over the next 18 months, Maliki moved aggressively to crush Sunni leadership.⁶⁶⁹

A final opportunity for the United States to exercise its waning influence for reform and reconciliation came in 2011 as the Administration attempted to renew the 2008 Status of Forces Agreement.⁶⁷⁰ This would be an uphill climb. The U.S. had agreed in 2008 for all troops to

⁶⁶⁵ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 646-9. See also Embassy Baghdad Cable, 20 January 2010). Ambassador Hill asked U.S. officials "from the highest levels of government" to dissuade Barzani on a referendum on Kirkuk. Embassy Baghdad Cable, 13 December 2009.

⁶⁶⁶ Tawfeeq, Karadsheh and Damon (12 November 2010). Gordon (22 September 2012).

⁶⁶⁷ Gates (2014), 472.

⁶⁶⁸ Ignatius (2015); Filkins (28 April 2014); Brennan et al (2013), 108.

⁶⁶⁹ Beinart (23 June 2014).

⁶⁷⁰ Gates believed the U.S. "should and would have a residual military presence in Iraq after the end of 2011 ... even though that would require a follow-on agreement with the Iraqis," but acknowledges that he should have been more realistic about the prospects given the difficult negotiations on the 2008 SOFA. Gates (2014), 238.

leave the country by December 31, 2011 – an outcome both Maliki and most Iraqis wanted. They were not alone. With the Americans out of the country and the governing coalition overwhelmingly Shi'a, arguably the biggest winner was Iran. The Obama Administration's enthusiasm for maintaining troops in the country was low. He had campaigned on a promise to get out of Iraq, and now his new country team was pushing to maintain a substantial presence. The Arab Spring was convulsing the Middle East and, along with Afghanistan, occupying the attention of the Administration.⁶⁷¹

As will be discussed in the next chapter, Obama had dramatically escalated the war in Afghanistan but the Taliban appeared no closer to collapse or entering a peace process. The Karzai government was rife with corruption. Tensions between the two Presidents were high. The U.S. troop surge there was to begin receding in July 2011. Obama and his inner circle may have been sensitive to criticism about ignoring the advice of his commanders on the ground. They had accused the military of trying to “box-in” the President regarding the troop surge in Afghanistan, and then fired General Stanley McChrystal after disparaging remarks by his staff were reported in *Rolling Stone*.⁶⁷² With the 2012 elections just around the corner, another crisis with the military could be unhelpful. In short, the main incentives for both Maliki and Obama were to let the SOFA expire while avoiding blame for doing so. The concessions needed to secure an agreement would need to be high enough for both to justify the political risk.⁶⁷³

Gordon and Trainor report that General Austin offered his estimate for the post-2011 force to cover the training, advising, and counterterrorism missions: 20,000 to 24,000 troops. He assessed that a force of this size would still entail moderate risk. The Pentagon asked Austin to

⁶⁷¹ Gates (2014), 501-523.

⁶⁷² Woodward (2010), 247-8; 311-3; Londoño and Whitlock (18 September 2013); Gates (2014), 563, 573-577.

⁶⁷³ Boghani (29 July 2014).

review the numbers again, which the latter revised downward with a preferred option of 19,000 troops, a middle option at 16,000, and a low option of 10,000 which he deemed high risk.⁶⁷⁴ The Pentagon must have massaged the numbers a bit more because a 29 April 2011 Principals Committee discussed options at 16,000, 10,000, and 8,000 troops.⁶⁷⁵ Secretary of Defense Gates thought the lower two options could work.⁶⁷⁶ Admiral Michael Mullen, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, supported Austin's recommendation of 16,000. Both flag officers reportedly believed that having no troops at all in Iraq was better than having too few. Mullen exercised his legal right as Chairman and the President's principal uniformed military advisor to express his concerns in a written memo to the National Security Advisor, Tom Donilon.⁶⁷⁷ The arguments, however, remained fixated on troop numbers, without any serious mention of advancing political reform and reconciliation.⁶⁷⁸ In May 2011 Maliki hinted that he might support an American military presence if he could garner enough political support.⁶⁷⁹ Obama, fresh off the successful Abbottabad raid that killed Osama bin Laden in his villa in Pakistan, approved a residual force in Iraq of up to 10,000 troops.⁶⁸⁰ By early June the Obama Administration communicated four conditions that the Iraqis would have to meet in order for U.S. forces to remain. First, the government of Iraq needed to make an official request. Second, Maliki would need to gain parliamentary approval for a SOFA continuing the same 2008 legal

⁶⁷⁴ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 654-8; Gates (2014), 552-3.

⁶⁷⁵ Peter Baker (22 June 2014).

⁶⁷⁶ Gates (2014), 555.

⁶⁷⁷ The Chairman's role as the President's principal uniformed military advisor is enshrined in the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. Donilon was reportedly outraged and called in a tirade to Under Secretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy demanding she keep better control of the military. Gordon & Trainor (2012), 658-660.

⁶⁷⁸ Gates (2014), 554. In an April 2011 meeting with Maliki, for instance, Gates focused on the needs of Iraqi security forces and the strategy to build Iraqi support for the SOFA.

⁶⁷⁹ Arango and Schmidt (10 May 2011); Issa and Gutman (12 May 2011).

⁶⁸⁰ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 666; Panetta (2014), 356.

immunities for U.S. soldiers in Iraq. Third, Maliki would need to fill the vacant Ministry of Defense position and other open positions within the security ministries. Finally, Maliki had to act against Iran-supported Special Groups which had been using EFPs (explosive force penetrators) and IRAMs (rocket assisted mortars) against U.S. troops.⁶⁸¹ Whether intended or not, the second requirement was a poison-pill. The U.S. appeared to be dictating internal Iraqi government procedures. Even if Maliki wanted U.S. troops to remain, the concessions he would likely have to make to gain approval would have been substantial – especially considering Iraqi public opinion on the matter.⁶⁸² Two former senior White House officials with knowledge of both the 2008 and 2011 negotiations note that Maliki got what he wanted in 2008; he would be highly unlikely to overturn the timeline without major U.S. concessions.⁶⁸³

Nonetheless, this provision gave both Obama and Maliki a reasonable escape from potential blame.⁶⁸⁴ In August Obama further reduced the maximum presence to 5,000.⁶⁸⁵ The political risk of meeting the conditions for so little gain was likely deemed by Maliki to be too high. In the event, Iraqi leaders supported U.S. military trainers but ruled out immunities (only the Kurds supported the immunities). Obama ended the negotiations on October 21.⁶⁸⁶ A former senior White House official told New York Times correspondent Peter Baker, “We really

⁶⁸¹ Brennan et al (2013), 13.

⁶⁸² Some U.S. officials believed that Maliki was trying to increase his leverage by delaying any agreement, and believed until the end that the Iraqis would ask the United States to keep forces in Iraq (Brennan et al (2013) p. 104).

⁶⁸³ Interviewees B and K.

⁶⁸⁴ Gates (2014), 555.

⁶⁸⁵ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 672; Panetta (2014), 392-9.

⁶⁸⁶ Gordon & Trainor (2012), 671-3. After Islamic State emerged, the U.S. sent commandos and trainers to Iraq in 2014 under an Executive Agreement.

didn't want to be there and he really didn't want us there.... It was almost a mutual decision, not said directly to each other, but in reality that's what it became. And you had a president who was going to be running for re-election, and getting out of Iraq was going to be a big statement."⁶⁸⁷

As the U.S. forces prepared to leave, Maliki's sectarian agenda was in full swing.⁶⁸⁸ Provinces with significant Sunni populations such as Diyala, Salahuddin, Ninevah and Anbar began to demand autonomy under a provision in the Iraqi constitution.⁶⁸⁹ Shi'as stormed the provincial council building in Baqubah (Diyala).⁶⁹⁰ In a joint press conference on December 12, meanwhile, Obama praised Maliki's efforts in leading Iraq's "most inclusive government yet."⁶⁹¹ Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq told CNN he was shocked that Obama greeted Maliki as the "elected leader of a sovereign, self-reliant and democratic Iraq" in light of his continued aggressive targeting of Sunni Arab leaders.⁶⁹² Maliki reportedly told Obama that Iraq's Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and other Sunnis in his government supported terrorism.⁶⁹³ One week after being lauded by Obama for inclusiveness, Maliki sent troops to arrest Hashimi. The latter fled in time, but thirteen of his bodyguards were tortured and sentenced to death.⁶⁹⁴

⁶⁸⁷ Baker (22 June 2014)

⁶⁸⁸ Gerth/ProPublica and Warrick (August 15, 2016).

⁶⁸⁹ Hammoudi (29 October 2011); Ibrahim (24 November 2011); Carlstrom (22 December 2011).

⁶⁹⁰ Sowell (9 August 2014).

⁶⁹¹ The White House (December 12, 2011).

⁶⁹² Damon and Tawfeeq (13 December 2011).

⁶⁹³ Beinart (23 June 2014)

⁶⁹⁴ Stevenson (31 December 2014).

By mid-2014 a new Sunni Arab insurgency was flourishing.⁶⁹⁵ Daesh had taken Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul, and Tikrit, and established a proto-state along the Euphrates in Iraq and Syria by feeding on the alienation of Sunni Arabs and engaging in a sophisticated combination of coercion, selective violence, and local governance.⁶⁹⁶ In September 2014, U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper confessed, “We underestimated ISIL [the Islamic State] and overestimated the fighting capability of the Iraqi Army. ... I didn’t see the collapse of the Iraqi security force in the north coming. ... It boils down to predicting the will to fight, which is an imponderable.”⁶⁹⁷ That might be true, but the misjudgment was much larger. Winding down the Iraq war was given much higher strategic priority than taking steps needed to bring about a favorable and durable outcome, which may have motivated U.S. policymakers to rationalize the myriad signs of trouble that pointed to a potentially explosive political fragility. “U.S. policymakers and planners did not pro-actively consider the transformative nature of the withdrawal of U.S. military forces,” argues a RAND study, “and the effects that transformation would have on strategic- and policy-level issues for both Iraq and the region.”⁶⁹⁸

Conclusion

The picture that emerges of war termination in Iraq is one of highly sophisticated military efforts and fragmented under-resourced political activities untethered to an integrated strategy. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Bush administration assumed a decisive victory over Saddam

⁶⁹⁵ Sowell (2014).

⁶⁹⁶ Craig Whiteside (29 April 2015); Nance (2015); McCants (2015).

⁶⁹⁷ Ignatius (18 September 2014).

⁶⁹⁸ Brennan et al. (2013), p. 17. The underestimation of U.S. forces’ centrality in preventing sectarian violence was noted by Interviewees B, C, and O.

Hussein's fielded forces would yield lasting success. Obsessed with military details, the U.S. government failed to develop a strategy that brought together and managed the elements of national power to bring about a favorable and durable outcome. When decisive victory failed to materialize, the United States was left scrambling for a way forward. The failure to consider war termination led to a myopic strategy that fixated on the military campaign and ignored the aftermath. This led to the super-empowerment of mostly Shi'a exiles and elites and decisions to launch a de-Ba'athification campaign and disband the Iraqi Army. Aggressive military efforts fed perceptions of Sunni Arab disenfranchisement. The latter fought back, igniting a fierce insurgency. This gap in strategy heightened the risk the war would turn into a quagmire.

Chapter 4 showed how the strategy became intractable as the un-prioritized elements of national power self-synchronized in unproductive ways. Confirmation bias, political and bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems impeded the Bush administration's ability to recognize and modify a failing strategy. Political development was viewed largely as an engineering project, setting milestones to be achieved using highly pliable resources. Arranged in the right sequence, the project was assumed to succeed. The milestone-centric approach failed to account for the aggressive and sometimes bloody scrimmage for power. The major problems were occurring at the interface of the silos. Local elites manipulated the milestones and the gaps between U.S. military, political, and economic silos. The fault-lines between political and military silos damaged legitimacy while amplifying violence. The more the United States uncritically backed a sectarian government, the greater the resistance to American presence. Sectarianism and insurgency fed on one another into a downward spiral. Meanwhile, U.S. officials stubbornly refused to change strategy, citing examples of progress in achieving milestones as evidence of disaster mounted.

When offered a new approach to salvage the war, Bush boldly decided to surge in the face of opposition calls for withdrawal. The new approach succeeded in diminishing the Sunni Arab

insurgency, but failed to advance reconciliation and substantive political inclusion. The continued absence of a political strategy and waning support in the United States and Iraq for the American troops presence damaged U.S. leverage and undermined the prospects for a favorable and durable outcome. U.S. military and diplomats managed to curb some of the worst excesses and defuse myriad crises, but could not change the underlying logic of Maliki's aggressive sectarianism. The Bush Administration missed an opportunity to use the SOFA negotiations to advance what they considered to be an essential requirement for success. Maliki got the troop withdrawal dates he so eagerly sought in exchange for no political concessions.

The Obama Administration, eager to end the Iraq war, attempted to apply low-leverage conditionality with troop presence that unwittingly played into Maliki's hands. Ambassador Hill and General Odierno had very different views on the way forward in Iraq. Neither one had the authority to manage the U.S. efforts or the relationship with Maliki and the Iraqi government. This resulted in issues getting kicked upstairs to Washington DC. Instead of attempting to use the 2010 elections and the 2011 SOFA negotiations to advance the prospects of reconciliation, the Obama Administration took the path of least resistance – pressuring the Sunni Arabs and Kurds to go along with Maliki. In the end, both leaders got what they wanted – a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Kenneth Pollack, a Middle Eastern expert at the Brookings Institution argues in the case of Iraq that “military success is not being matched with the commensurate political-economic efforts that will ultimately determine whether battlefield successes are translated into lasting achievements.”⁶⁹⁹ What the U.S. has lacked was not a set of plans but a strategy to achieve a favorable and durable outcome that accounts for the competing and conflicting interests of others. In his landmark study on strategy, historian Lawrence Freedman described the ancient

⁶⁹⁹ Pollack (28 March 2016).

Greek concept of metis as a form of strategic intelligence. It “conveyed a sense of a capacity to think ahead ... grasp how others think and behave ... and stay focused on the ultimate goal even when caught in ambiguous and uncertain situations.”⁷⁰⁰ The combined challenges of cognitive bias, political frictions, patron-client problems and bargaining asymmetries undermined the prospects of a favorable and durable outcome. Both U.S. administrations relied on a transition method for war termination, but failed to address the critical risks to success.

⁷⁰⁰ Freedman (2013), 23-4.

Chapter 6: Pursuit of Decisive Victory in Afghanistan

In response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America by al Qaeda, the United States issued an ultimatum to the Taliban government in Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden was residing, to hand over al Qaeda's senior leaders. When the Taliban refused, the United States initiated military action on October 7. By the end of 2001, the regime had disintegrated, with many senior Taliban and al Qaeda leaders fleeing into hiding across the border into Pakistan.⁷⁰¹ The United States believed it had won a decisive victory. Northern Alliance forces moved into and beyond Kabul.⁷⁰² The Bonn Conference in November 2001 began the process of forming a new government and political order in Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai was selected to lead the transitional administration, and would be elected president in 2004 and again in 2009. All that was left, the Bush administration believed, was to hunt down the remaining al Qaeda and Taliban senior leaders, while the international community rebuilt Afghanistan, and move to the next phase in the Global War on Terrorism.⁷⁰³ After the U.S. rejected peace overtures in late 2001 and early 2002, the Taliban began reorganizing.⁷⁰⁴ The insurgency gained strength by 2006 due to external support and sanctuary in Pakistan as well as increasing local support in Afghanistan.⁷⁰⁵ At the same time, the Afghan government was developing into

⁷⁰¹ Tomsen (2011), 587-618; Barfield (2010), 283-285. For a detailed look at the fighting and various defections in northern Afghanistan, see Anderson (10 December 2001).

⁷⁰² For U.S. concerns about Northern Alliance forces in Kabul, see Woodward (2006), 230-4, 236-41, 306-11

⁷⁰³ Felbab-Brown (2012), 4-19; According to Bob Woodward, the CIA briefed that the Taliban and al Qaeda were "joined at the hip." Woodward (2006), 52; 114. Nonetheless, the Administration's initial approach was to allow the Taliban "time to do the right thing" and turn over bin Laden, 121-130; for discussion about inducing a Taliban coup against Mullah Omar, see 128-9

⁷⁰⁴ Dobbins and Malkasian (2015).

⁷⁰⁵ Seth Jones (2009), 163-182.

a predatory kleptocracy that generated widespread resentment and fueled the return of the Taliban.⁷⁰⁶

What Went Wrong?

Afghanistan had good potential for a successful outcome. The Taliban was among the world's most maligned and incompetent governments.⁷⁰⁷ The September 11 attacks generated global antipathy toward them and support for a change in Kabul. The state of ruin in Afghanistan after over twenty years of continuous conflict and misrule engendered international sympathy and support. No external support was forthcoming for the Taliban (aside from continued assistance from parts of the Pakistan Army). The regime collapsed quickly after the U.S.-led attack. No ethnic or sectarian conflict stirred in the wake of the Taliban's fall. Although a polyglot of several ethnicities and a small, ethnically distinct Shi'a minority, Afghanistan exhibited general acceptance of such differences.⁷⁰⁸

What went wrong? *New York Times* reporter and long-time regional expert Carlotta Gall blames Pakistan for "driving the violence in Afghanistan for its own cynical, hegemonic reasons," and criticize the ineffectual U.S. responses to it.⁷⁰⁹ Ahmed Rashid adds American neglect of nation-building.⁷¹⁰ Afghanistan expert Barnett Rubin and others include additional U.S. mistakes, such as an overly militarized focus, bureaucratic dysfunction, failure to develop

⁷⁰⁶ Chayes (2015), 3-66, 135-155.

⁷⁰⁷ See, for instance, Rashid (2000); Hosseini, (2003).

⁷⁰⁸ Moradian (26 July 2016).

⁷⁰⁹ Gall (2014, xxi. For more on the challenges in U.S.-Pakistan relations, see also Haqqani (2013).

⁷¹⁰ See also Rashid (2008) and (2012).

early opportunities for reconciliation, and torture at American detention facilities.⁷¹¹ Former ISAF and Pentagon senior advisor Sarah Chayes includes corruption and U.S. acquiescence and unwitting promotion of it.⁷¹² Stephen Walt and Dan Bolger cite overly ambitious aims and underestimation of the means required to achieve them.⁷¹³

These are all important challenges that the Bush administration underappreciated. As in Iraq, the Bush administration fixated on the military campaign to overthrow the existing Taliban regime, and failed to properly consider war termination and the challenges of creating a favorable and durable outcome. This gap in strategy heightened the risks that the problems cited above would materialize and result in an intractable conflict. Returning to the model outlined in Chapter 2, success hinged upon two critical factors: 1) the establishment of a government that could earn and retain legitimacy, particularly in the Taliban's southern Pashtun constituency; and 2) preventing armed resistance from becoming a sustainable insurgency. Decisive victory was possible had those two conditions been achieved. Neither was met.

The Bush Administration took a minimalist approach to post-Taliban Afghanistan. As this chapter will show, they rejected the opportunity to promote an inclusive political process that enabled former pro-Taliban constituencies to participate. Blinded by the view that the Taliban and al Qaeda were terrorist bedfellows, and encouraged in this belief by Northern Alliance partners, U.S. officials promoted an exclusive political order that alienated many southern and eastern Pashtuns. As the new Afghan government turned predatory and elites used unwittingly international forces and officials to intimidate or eliminate their personal and political rivals,

⁷¹¹ Barnett R. Rubin (January/February 2007) and (2013); Lamb (2015); Fairweather (2014); Tomsen (2011); Chandrasekaran (2012); Nasr (2013), 1-94; Khalizad (24 March 2016).

⁷¹² Chayes (2015) and (2006).

⁷¹³ Walt (15 March 2013).

disaffected Afghans began looking to the Taliban and others for help. Pakistan, fearing Afghanistan would become a client of India, provided the sanctuary necessary for the Taliban to regroup and begin an insurgency.

Light Footprints to a Long War

The September 11, 2001, terror attacks by *al Qaida* on the American homeland were psychologically dislocating. The day was deadlier than the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 6, 1941, and left Americans with a chilling sense of vulnerability. President Bush felt compelled to respond, but sought to carefully limit the scale and duration of the American commitment. The Bush Administration's light footprint approach to the war in Afghanistan was rooted in an ideological rejection to nation-building; a desire to avoid getting bogged down in a remote, land-locked country; the belief that information technology had revolutionized military affairs; and a misreading of Afghan history and politics. Combined with lack of strategy that included little serious thought about war termination, these views set the conditions for a bloody and expensive quagmire.

Presidential candidate George W. Bush had campaigned against nation-building to distinguish himself from President Clinton and from his 2000 election opponent Vice President Al Gore. The peacekeeping mission in Somalia, begun during the George H.W. Bush Administration, ended disastrously early in the Clinton Administration.⁷¹⁴ Similar missions to Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo were unpopular with many military officials and critics, who viewed such efforts as a distraction from the primary mission of fighting and winning the nation's wars.⁷¹⁵

⁷¹⁴ Bowden (1999); Elmi (2010).

⁷¹⁵ Sefarino (August 2000); Spencer (15 September 2000). Fleitz (2002).

Although the Balkan missions had kept the peace with a sizable NATO military footprint, Bush argued during the campaign that they had drained resources, sapped readiness, and undermined the military's morale.⁷¹⁶ As U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld later put it in December 2001: "Nation building does not have a brilliant record across the globe."⁷¹⁷ The U.S. wanted to overthrow the Taliban and bring terrorist leaders to justice, and the dominant view in U.S. government was that the military should focus on the fighting and let others worry about reconstruction.

The Bush Administration was also seeing the conflict as a "global war on terrorism" rather than a war in Afghanistan alone. "This military action is a part of our campaign against terrorism," Bush told the American people on the eve of the Afghanistan invasion, "another front in a war that has already been joined through diplomacy, intelligence, the freezing of financial assets and the arrests of known terrorists by law enforcement agents in 38 countries. Given the nature and reach of our enemies, we will win this conflict by the patient accumulation of successes, by meeting a series of challenges with determination and will and purpose."⁷¹⁸ In this view the Taliban and al Qaeda were ideological bedfellows within the global jihadi network.⁷¹⁹ Terrorist attacks on the Indian Legislative Assembly on October 1, 2001, and on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001, which India blamed on Pakistan, appeared to add credibility to the global nature of the threat (even though both attacks were actually manifestations of a longstanding simmering conflict between India and Pakistan).⁷²⁰ Meanwhile, the Bush Administration was convinced that Saddam Hussein's Iraq was a state

⁷¹⁶ Gordon (21 October 2000).

⁷¹⁷ Stephen Robinson (10 December 2001).

⁷¹⁸ President George W. Bush, "Presidential Address to the Nation," October 7, 2001.

⁷¹⁹ van Linschoten and Kuehn (2012).

⁷²⁰ Miglani (14 December 2001); *Wall Street Journal*, 13 July 2011.

sponsor of terrorism.⁷²¹ If the latter provided al Qaeda with weapons of mass destruction, future attacks on the United States could be far more damaging than those of September 11. “We’re a peaceful nation,” Bush argued, “Yet, as we have learned, so suddenly and so tragically, there can be no peace in a world of sudden terror. In the face of today’s new threat, the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it.”⁷²² In his state of the union address on 29 January 2002, Bush famously called out Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as constituting an “axis of evil” that threatens American and its allies with weapons of mass destruction – weapons they could provide to “a terrorist underworld -- including groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, Jaish-i-Mohammed – [that] operate[s] in remote jungles and deserts, and hide[s] in the centers of large cities.”⁷²³ The threat was shadowy, dispersed, and deadly. The United States, in this view, could not afford to get fixated on Afghanistan.⁷²⁴

The globalized nature of the perceived threat reinforced Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s belief that the Pentagon needed to adapt. Information technology, he believed, had revolutionized military affairs and permitted wars to be fought and won with far fewer ground forces. The new defense secretary had challenged what he considered to be an antiquated view of war by the Pentagon’s brass, particularly the Army. Enthusiastic about concepts of ‘network-centric warfare’ which supposedly promised dominant battlespace knowledge by harnessing information technology, Rumsfeld envisioned wars of the future fought from the air and by

⁷²¹ Woodward (2004), 24-27; Warrick (2015), 101-125.

⁷²² George W. Bush (7 October 2001).

⁷²³ George W. Bush (29 January 2002).

⁷²⁴ As noted in a 3 November U.S. State Department cable outlining discussion points to be conveyed to other capitals, “The president has made clear that the campaign against terrorism is a sustained campaign that will outlast the immediate efforts in Afghanistan, but our immediate focus is the *al-Qaida* network and its base in Afghanistan.” U.S. Department of State Cable, 3 November 2001.

small special operations forces teams calling in precision fires on massed enemy formations.⁷²⁵ Reductions in costly military personnel could be better spent on advanced military technology. In a war with global dimensions, harnessing such promise would be critical for success. Afghanistan was to be a proving ground for his vision of future war and solidify his intellectual victory over what he considered to be a pedantic uniformed military.

The light footprint approach was fortified by misreading Afghan history and politics. Infamous for being the so-called “graveyard of Empires,” Afghanistan had earned a reputation – justified or not – for suffocating occupying powers into quagmires.⁷²⁶ With the Soviet defeat there less than fifteen years old and in the recent memories of senior officials such as Vice President Richard Cheney and Rumsfeld, the Administration wanted to avoid the same trap.⁷²⁷ By using special forces and local partners instead of a large scale conventional attack, Rumsfeld could conserve valuable resources, maintain strategic agility, usher in a new way of war, and prevent backlash against foreign presence.⁷²⁸ Experts on Afghanistan reportedly reinforced the Administration’s fears, leading Rumsfeld, at least, to believe that a very limited military footprint would best prevent a supposedly congenital Afghan hostility toward foreigners from spilling over into armed conflict.⁷²⁹

Acclaimed UN envoy for Afghanistan Lakhdar Brahimi may have invented the term “light footprint” during a UN conference in 2000, but he argued retrospectively that the idea should

⁷²⁵ Rumsfeld (2002); Light (July 2005); Cebrowski and Garstka (1998); Johnson & Libicki (1995). For critiques see Kolenda (2003); Frederick W. Kagan (2006); Donald Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan (2000).

⁷²⁶ Seth Jones (2009).

⁷²⁷ See Andres, Wills, and Griffith Jr. (2005/06), 124- 160; Rumsfeld (2011), 360

⁷²⁸ For a critique of Afghanistan as validating a new way of war, see Biddle (2003), 31-46. Woodward (2006), 53

⁷²⁹ Interviewees M and J. Rumsfeld (2011), p. 372-373; See, for instance, Richard Holbrooke, “As for the United States, it would not be in anyone's interests for it to supply more than a limited number of logistics and communications support troops. Its presence in fixed positions on the ground in Afghanistan would be just the target the next generation of suicide bombers would most welcome.” Holbrooke (15 November 2001).

not fixate on a small international presence. Instead, he proposed that international experts should avoid creating parallel structures and engaging in capacity-substitution efforts that undermined legitimacy and created dependency. “A golden principle for international assistance,” he said, “should be that everyone shall do everything possible to work himself or herself out of a job as early as possible.”⁷³⁰ Richard Holbrooke, architect of the 1995 Dayton Accords that brought an end to the war in Bosnia, warned, “Afghans have been fighting among themselves too long to form an integrated security force right now. The only real options are a UN peacekeeping force or a multilateral force that is sanctioned by the UNSC but run separately from the UN.”⁷³¹ The “light footprint” mantra was easily appropriated by those wanting to limit commitments of people and resources to Afghanistan.⁷³² There exists no equivalent to the Chilcot report for Afghanistan, so the nature and extent of U.K.’s emphasis on a post-Taliban strategy is not yet known. The lack of discussion about war termination for the Iraq war suggests that such discussion was likely absent for the Afghan conflict as well.

A Recent History of Bad Neighbors and Worse Governance

Regional politics weighed heavily on Afghanistan. Pakistan, India, and Iran have historically co-opted certain Afghan constituencies to secure their interests and to check or undermine their rivals. Frictions between Afghanistan and Pakistan since the latter’s founding in 1947 created enduring tensions, leading Afghans to view malign activity from their eastern neighbor as the root cause of most of their problems. Support from India and Iran (and often Russia) has been

⁷³⁰ Brahimi (2007), 4, 16-17. The quote is from page 16.

⁷³¹ Holbrooke (November 15, 2001)

⁷³² See the description by Rubin (2007), 65; Stapleton and Keating (2015).

a historic counterbalance.⁷³³ The Indo-Pak rivalry in Afghanistan has been intense and bloody as both countries have sought controlling influence.⁷³⁴ Iran has mainly sought to secure political and economic interests in their near abroad of western Afghanistan and with their Shi'a co-religionists, the Hazaras in central Afghanistan.

Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a particularly difficult history. An 1893 memorandum of understanding between Mortimer Durand, the foreign secretary of British India, and the Afghan emir Abdur Rahman Khan demarcated the border between British India and Afghanistan. The so-called Durand Line separated various Pashtun tribes between the two empires and placed Baluchistan in British India.⁷³⁵ These were once lands of the Afghan empire that stretched to the Indus river in the east and Indian Ocean in the south.⁷³⁶ By 1893 these areas were locally controlled but under the influence of British India. Nonetheless, the Afghans were quick to deny the validity of the agreement. Perhaps seeking to take advantage of British exhaustion after the First World War, the Afghans sought to test the boundary during the third Anglo-Afghan war of 1919. The latter were defeated and emir Aminullah Khan reaffirmed the border in Article 5 of the peace treaty ending the conflict.⁷³⁷ Afghans, however, persisted in not recognizing the border. When British India was partitioned in 1947 to create (primarily Hindu) India and (Muslim) Pakistan, Afghanistan was the only state in the United Nations that refused to recognize Pakistan.⁷³⁸ Conflict between the two countries has been persistent. Afghanistan

⁷³³ Price (August 2013); Tomsen (2011), 91-96, 455; Lambah (12 November 2015); *Council on Foreign Relations* (October 2003); Bajoria (22 July 2009).

⁷³⁴ Nasr (2013), p. 47-48. Rubin and Rashid (2008), 35-38.

⁷³⁵ Brasseur (2011).

⁷³⁶ See Siddique (25 October 2012); for the Pashtun nationalist viewpoint see Afghanland.com.

⁷³⁷ Rahi (21 February 2014).

⁷³⁸ Tomsen (2011), 41-2, 237-40; Micallef (21 November 2015).

sought and received material and economic support from India and the Soviet Union.⁷³⁹ The United States and Pakistan became partners in SEATO (South East Asia Treaty Organization) and CENTO (Central Treaty Organization), part of a system of alliances designed to contain the Soviet Union and communist expansion. CENTO was largely unsuccessful as Soviet influence expanded in the Middle East and Central Asia. Pakistan tried twice to call on U.S. military assistance in its wars with India in 1965 and 1971, only to be disappointed.⁷⁴⁰ This history began to form a narrative in Pakistan about American abandonment.

In 1973 Mohammad Daoud Khan, first cousin and former Prime Minister to King Zahir Shah, overthrew the latter and established a republic with himself as president.⁷⁴¹ Frictions with Pakistan increased as each sponsored proxy conflicts against the other. Among those sponsored by the Pakistanis were Ahmad Shah Massoud, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Jalaluddin Haqqani.⁷⁴² Daoud Khan was overthrown by the communists in the 1978 Saur revolution, who declared the PDRA (People's Democratic Republic of Afghanistan). Instability soon followed as Afghan *mujahideen* parties rebelled against the new government. CENTO dissolved in 1979 with the Iranian revolution. That same year the Soviets installed Babrak Kamal into power and began large scale military support to help him combat a burgeoning insurgency. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans fled to neighboring countries, mostly to Pakistan, as the latter provided financial and military support to the *mujahideen*. Seeing an opportunity to bloody the Soviet

⁷³⁹ Price (2013); Tomsen (2011), 91-96, 455.

⁷⁴⁰ Stephen Philip Cohen (2004), 8, 55, 62-3, 302

⁷⁴¹ Tomsen (2011), 105-6.

⁷⁴² Coll (2005), p. 113-4; Tomsen (2011), p. 237-41;

nose, the United States began a large-scale covert program, funneled through Pakistan, to support the rebels.⁷⁴³

By 1985 the Soviets began withdrawing from Afghanistan. The 1988 Geneva Accords signed by the USSR, Pakistan, and the United States, called for a cease fire to permit the Soviet withdrawal and an end to external support for the Afghan *mujahideen*.⁷⁴⁴ Pakistan, contrary to the Accords, continued providing support and sanctuary to the Afghan *mujahideen*. The Soviets kept military advisors to support the Najibullah regime in their fight against the insurgent groups. With the Soviets out of the war and the Warsaw Pact crumbling by November 1989, American interest in Central Asia faded. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan would add this to the betrayal narrative.

The seven main *mujahideen* parties continued fighting the Najibullah regime from 1989 to 1992. As the Soviet Union collapsed and could no longer fund their Afghan clients, the Afghan state imploded under the combined weight of insurgency and fiscal crisis. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Pakistan's closest *mujahideen* ally, while on the verge of victory was beaten into Kabul by Ahmad Shah Massoud's *Shura-e-Nazar* army. Control of the capital meant leverage in forming a post-communist government. Osama bin Laden reportedly tried but failed to broker a peace agreement between Hekmatyar and Massoud.⁷⁴⁵

With the communist government overthrown and the *mujahideen* in control, Pakistan must have believed it could finally secure a friendly – even client – government in Afghanistan. They would be disappointed. Pakistan brokered the Peshawar Accords of 1992 that created the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA). This was a power-sharing agreement which salami-sliced

⁷⁴³ Crile (2003); Coll (2005), 19-186.

⁷⁴⁴ Klass (1998).

⁷⁴⁵ Coll (2005), 187-238.

the government among six of the seven *mujahideen* parties into warlord-controlled fiefdoms. Hekmatyar refused to sign the agreement because he believed that he deserved to control the government. His powerful *Hizb-i-Islami* party began fighting the ISA, with support from Pakistan, leading to the onset of the Afghan civil war. Pakistan attempted to broker another peace deal in 1993, resulting in the Islamabad Accords. This agreement installed Hekmatyar as Prime Minister, with Burhanuddin Rabbani, head of the overwhelmingly Tajik *Jamiat* party, as President. The cease-fire lasted barely twenty-four hours as the new Prime Minister's forces began shelling the capital.⁷⁴⁶

With Pakistan backing Hekmatyar, the other warring parties and the ISA would seek funding elsewhere. Sayyaf's party was reportedly bankrolled by Saudi Arabia, Abdur Rashid Dostum's Uzbeks by Uzbekistan, and the Shi'a parties by Iran. ISA and its mainly *Jamiat* party were funded mainly by India who seized upon an opportunity to ensure Afghanistan did not become a client state of Pakistan.⁷⁴⁷ When al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was kicked out of Sudan following pressure from the U.S., Sayyaf and President Rabbani invited him to Afghanistan.⁷⁴⁸ Aside from being a participant in the *jihad* against the Soviets, bin Laden's money and connections could be useful for prosecuting the civil war. The warring factions destroyed Kabul. Throughout the countryside, warlords and local strongmen ran amok murdering, raping, and pillaging. Their crimes against the Afghan people were staggering.⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁶ Rubin (1995), 247-64; Coll (2005), 235-9; 262-5; Barfield (2010), 164-271.

⁷⁴⁷ Coll (2005), 289-90; Weinbaum (June 2006); Howenstein and Ganguly (24 March 2010).

⁷⁴⁸ Gutman (2007), 89-90. Crilly (3 October 2013); GlobalSecurity.org, "Ustad Abdul Rasul Sayyaf," 5 April 2014

⁷⁴⁹ For a personal account see Qais Akbar Omar (2013).

The Taliban arose in 1994 in opposition to such lawlessness and wanton abuse.⁷⁵⁰ As the Taliban gained momentum and Hekmatyar looked increasingly unlikely to be successful, Pakistan moved more and more support to the former. The Taliban rapidly gained support among the population and by 1996 had overthrown the ISA and established a new government. On September 27, 1996, the Taliban seized control of Kabul and established the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. By 2001, they controlled 90 percent of the country, imposing an incompetent semi-theocratic rule and committing new levels of abuse on the people. Only three states recognized the Taliban government: Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. If Pakistan had hoped the new regime would become a client state, or at least recognize the Durand line, they were again to be disappointed. During the five years of misrule by the Taliban, no agreement ratifying the validity of the border was forthcoming. The groups loyal to ISA continued to fight on from their strongholds in northeast Afghanistan, funded in part by India and Iran and others who sought to deny complete Taliban control of the country and Pakistani hegemony in Afghanistan.⁷⁵¹

To the west, Iran had opposed the Taliban regime and supported the Hazara factions fighting it. They maintained a policy of influence in their eastern near-abroad, centered on Herat and the central Afghanistan Hazarajat. Keen to prevent the rise of a Saudi Arabian client state in Afghanistan and renewed nacro-trafficking across their borders, Iran proved helpful in the Bonn process to form a new government.⁷⁵² That support ended abruptly with Iran's inclusion by President Bush in the 2002 axis of evil. Nonetheless, Iran continued backing the Hazara factions and promoting economic development in Herat and western Afghanistan.⁷⁵³

⁷⁵⁰ Zaeef (2010).

⁷⁵¹ Tomsen (2011), 451-517; Barfield (2010), 268-71; Weinbaum (2006)

⁷⁵² Nasr (2013), 50-52.

⁷⁵³ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable, 15 May 2004; U.S. Embassy Rome Cable, 27 Feb 2002 (discusses Ismail Khan's,

The U.S. recognized as early as October 2001 that some of these regional frictions and interests could be problematic, but did little to prevent the risk of them becoming destabilizing. A U.S. state department cable noted optimistically, “We do not see any irreconcilable conflict among these interests as long as Afghans and outside interests are flexible.”⁷⁵⁴

Back to the Future: Operation Enduring Freedom and the Bonn Conference

As the Northern Alliance and coalition forces advanced against the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan in October and November 2001, US and international diplomats began discussions about post-Taliban Afghanistan. With the Taliban’s military collapsing soon after the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, the United Nations convened an international conference outside of Bonn, under the leadership of Brahimi, to pave the political way forward. The Conference would establish key milestones for the development of a new government: creation of an Afghan Interim Transitional Administration, an Emergency *Loya Jirga* in 2002 to select an Afghan Transitional Administration which would develop a new constitution and govern the country until the elections; a Constitutional *Loya Jira* in 2003, a presidential election in 2004, and Parliamentary elections a year later.⁷⁵⁵

The U.S. State Department believed the effort needed to include the Northern Alliance, Zahir Shah supporters, and “southern Pashtuns.” Taliban rank and file would be expected to integrate

Tajik warlord from Herat, efforts to manipulate US-Iran competition); Kugelman (10 July 2014); Milani (5 October 2010).

⁷⁵⁴ U.S. Department of State Cable, 11 October 2001.

⁷⁵⁵ A *loya jirga* is a traditional governance council in Afghanistan, in which elders from across the country representing the various ethnicities, tribes, and communities come together to discuss and decide upon issues of national importance.

peacefully into society.⁷⁵⁶ Diplomatic efforts, U.S. envoy James Dobbins observed, had difficulty keeping pace with the rapidly unfolding military events. Northern Alliance forces under Mohammad Qasim Fahim, against U.S. demands to the contrary, captured Kabul on 13 November and began taking control of the city.⁷⁵⁷ Although the design was to invite a diverse array of non-Taliban leaders to chart a new political future for Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance and warlords from the former Islamic State of Afghanistan now wielded controlling influence over make-up of the Bonn Conference and Interim Transitional Authority.⁷⁵⁸

The selection of who would lead the transitional authority, therefore, was a delicate one. With Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud assassinated by al Qaeda operatives on 9 September 2001, no natural consensus leader was available. Even so, many would likely have opposed such an appointment given Massoud's role in the Afghan civil war and his Tajik ethnicity in a country traditionally ruled by the plurality Pashtuns. Some favored the return of the king, Zahir Shah, who lived in exile in Rome after being deposed in the 1973 coup. Various warlords vied for control, too, but none had the stature of Massoud. Aside from the victorious and fractious Northern Alliance the most powerful and organized party, as well as being Pashtun, was Hekmatyar's *Hizb-i-Islami* Gulbuddin (HiG), but they had not been invited to Bonn. Hekmatyar, a power-obsessed warlord who was once considered America's favorite *mujahideen* leader during the Soviet war, had run afoul of US sentiments. He welcomed the removal of the Taliban, but opposed the presence of international forces in Afghanistan for the obvious obstacle they would pose to his ambitions. Seeing the HiG party as a threat, the northern alliance factions sought to marginalize the former and to paint them as a Taliban and

⁷⁵⁶ U.S. Department of State cable, 3 November 2001

⁷⁵⁷ Dobbins (2008), 51, 54, 85, 87-88; *BBC News* (13 November 2001).

⁷⁵⁸ The so-called "Rome Group" that represented the deposed Afghan King Zahir Shah was also in attendance, but had limited influence.

al Qaeda – allied security threat. Leaflets reportedly appeared in refugee camps in Pakistan claiming Hekmatyar had joined al Qaeda and the Taliban. He was later accused of an April 2002 assassination attempt on Karzai, which he vehemently denied.⁷⁵⁹ Such manipulative efforts were successful. The US began targeting the HiG and in February 2003 designated Hekmatyar as a global terrorist. They reportedly fired on the warlords' vehicle in May.⁷⁶⁰ Hekmatyar declared *jihad* on the Americans afterward. His reported efforts to join the Karzai government in 2004 were rebuffed.⁷⁶¹

Consensus on who would lead the interim administration began to form around Hamid Karzai. Scion of the Popalzai tribe of the Durrani Pashtuns – the tribe from which earlier Afghan kings had emerged – fiercely anti-Taliban, and without blood on his hands from the civil war – Karzai proved an attractive option.⁷⁶² Because he had no party, militia or following of his own, he was unobjectionable to the Afghan warlords who traditionally favored weak leaders they could control and manipulate. He spoke perfect, almost poetic English, which made him attractive to the US and the western powers. He spent much of his life in Afghanistan and in the region, rather than in the US or Europe. The factors which made him an attractive choice to lead the new government would also leave him beholden to warlords, who could make his life miserable or even kill him if Karzai threatened their interests, unless the international military backed him against them. He was reportedly arrested and tortured in 1994 by Fahim Khan.⁷⁶³

⁷⁵⁹ Institute for the Study of War, “Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG).”

⁷⁶⁰ *Dawn* (20 February 2003); BBC News, “Profile: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,” 23 March 2010; GlobalSecurity.org. “*Hizb-i-Islami*,”

⁷⁶¹ Reuters (4 May 2004); Ruttig (May 2011).

⁷⁶² Dam (2014); Grenier (2015). For background on former Popalzai King Shah Shuja, see Dalrymple (2013).

⁷⁶³ Coll (2005), 286-7.

During the Bonn process the ISA seemed to emerge again under a different guise.⁷⁶⁴ *Shura-e-Nazar* controlled the key security ministries: Defense (Fahim), Interior (Younis Qanooni), National Directorate of Security (Sarwari), and Abdullah Abdullah as Foreign Minister. Other warlords such as Dostum, Ismail Khan, Mohaqqueq, Atta Noor, and Khalili were given positions of power and influence. The international community, Barnett Rubin concludes, empowered leaders that “the Afghan people had rejected.”⁷⁶⁵ Efforts by various international organizations to address the history of human rights abuses during the Afghan civil war were repeatedly repressed by the U.S. and Afghan elites.⁷⁶⁶ “The Bonn conference did not reflect the interests of the Afghan people,” a former Afghan government senior advisor reflected.⁷⁶⁷

The rapid overthrow of the Taliban must have been disconcerting to Pakistan. Even more troubling for them would have been the largely former ISA and monarchist (the so-called Rome party that supported exiled King Zahir Shah) make-up of the Bonn conference. According to a second-hand report of a meeting between Brahimi and French Foreign Minister Vedrine, the former cautioned that Pakistan would need to play a role in arranging a compromise between the northern alliance and the Zahir Shah’s supporters.⁷⁶⁸ If so, this would be an odd role for Pakistan to play given their historic relations. Threats from the U.S. to Pakistani President Musharraf were successful in gaining a measure of Pakistani support against al Qaeda, but Afghanistan’s eastern neighbor would be unlikely to turn on their Taliban allies.⁷⁶⁹ The myriad Afghan refugee camps still in Pakistan gave the Taliban plenty of places to hide, plan, recruit,

⁷⁶⁴ Interviewees J and Z.

⁷⁶⁵ Rubin (2007), p. 66.

⁷⁶⁶ U.S. Embassy Rome cable, 28 March 2003.

⁷⁶⁷ Interviewee R May 2016, Kabul; these views were corroborated by Interviewees J and Z.

⁷⁶⁸ U.S. Embassy Paris Cable, 16 October 2001.

⁷⁶⁹ Rubin & Rashid (2008), 37.

and reconstitute.⁷⁷⁰ India quickly became a close partner of Afghanistan, in part because so many former partners – ex-communists and ISA leaders – were back in power, in part to thwart Pakistani designs.⁷⁷¹ Pakistan came to believe that India and Afghanistan were supporting the Baluchistan insurgency and, most conspiratorially, to partition much of Pakistan between them.⁷⁷² A stable, hostile, India-allied Afghanistan was seen traditionally by Pakistan as an existential threat. For the first time since Pakistan's creation that possibility seemed to some to be very real. The provision of or acquiescence in sanctuary for the Taliban would be a useful hedge against such an outcome. Instability in a hostile Afghanistan was a preferable alternative.⁷⁷³

Seeking to remain focused on al Qaeda, senior Bush Administration officials wanted to hand-off responsibility for security and reconstruction in Afghanistan to the international community as soon as possible while the U.S. pursued the counterterrorism mission.⁷⁷⁴ By mid-December 2001, the Taliban forces had collapsed and their leaders either returned home or fled to Pakistan for safety.⁷⁷⁵ As diplomats continued discussing the size and scope of an international peacekeeping force, however, the U.S. military sought to delay the deployment of international forces to avoid complicating the hunt for al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. "General Franks is very much in charge of everything, and he doesn't want to worry about a multinational force," explained a U.S. military spokesman. "The US has one goal: Attack AQ and get the job done.

⁷⁷⁰ Tomsen (2011), 588-95; Barfield (2010), 326-330.

⁷⁷¹ U.S. Embassy New Delhi Cable, 5 July 2005; U.S. Embassy New Delhi Cable, 14 July 2005.

⁷⁷² Regarding Afghanistan claims on Pakistani territory, see Nasr (2013), 44.

⁷⁷³ Fair (2014), p. 103-135; Stephen Tankel, "Beyond the Double Game: Lessons from Pakistan's Approach to Islamist Militancy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 16 June 2016.

⁷⁷⁴ See *The Rumsfeld Papers*, Donald Rumsfeld email to Doug Feith, "Strategy," 30 October 2001; Colin Powell letter to Donald Rumsfeld, 16 April 2002; Donald Rumsfeld letter to Colin Powell, 8 April 2002a; Dao (17 April 2002).

⁷⁷⁵ John Kifner with Eric Schmitt (17 December 2001).

And they're not too worried about the rest of it right now."⁷⁷⁶ CIA and Afghan militia forces closed in on Osama bin Laden and the remaining al Qaeda forces in the Tora Bora region of eastern Afghanistan, but failed to prevent their escape to Pakistan.⁷⁷⁷ The Americans set up bases primarily in the southern and eastern parts of the country to support the counterterrorism efforts, restricting international forces (ISAF) to Kabul.⁷⁷⁸

This arrangement left internal security up for grabs. The vacuum created by the removal of the Taliban was filled by Northern Alliance forces and local militias, primarily those associated with the Panjshiri Tajik faction of the Jamiat party, *Shura-e-Nazar*.⁷⁷⁹ As the latter seized control of Kabul, they also assumed the security mission by *fait accompli*. With the security ministries led entirely by *Shura-e-Nazar*, they were free to organize their own police and military forces, and direct allied warlords and strongmen to do the same in their local areas.⁷⁸⁰ Minister of Defense Fahim promoted himself to "Marshal" and aimed to communicate clearly to Karzai who controlled the guns (and hence the real power) in Afghanistan. When Karzai arrived in Kabul in December 2001 as the newly appointed head of the Afghan Interim Authority, he was greeted on the tarmac by Fahim with his forces in military formation. Karzai's former jailer pointedly asked the newly appointed head of the interim government where were his men. Karzai pointed to Fahim's militia and deftly replied, "You are my men."

⁷⁷⁶ Sipress and Finn (November 30, 2001).

⁷⁷⁷ Theo Farrell (2017), chapter 3; Naylor (2005).

⁷⁷⁸ Farrell (2017), chapter 3; Sipress & Finn (November 30, 2001).

⁷⁷⁹ Woodward (2004) notes that the Administration was concerned about a security vacuum after the Taliban were overthrown, citing the parallels in the early 1990s that led to the rise of the Taliban (192-3, 214-9, 321). For a critical (but overly optimistic view) of overreliance on the Northern Alliance rather than cultivating Pashtun allies, see Edwards (2011).

⁷⁸⁰ Kelly, Bensahel, Oliger (2011); O'Brien and Baker (2003); Global Security.org, "Yunus Qanooni / Muhammad Yunus Qanuni."

Karzai would have been unlikely to miss Fahim's not-so-subtle message.⁷⁸¹ Politics was blood-sport in Afghanistan. Karzai would either need international military support in limiting the influence of the warlords or he would have to co-opt them. This political calculation would shape decisively the rule of Hamid Karzai.

Setting the Stage for Kleptocracy and Taliban Resurgence

Neither the United States nor the nascent Afghan government developed and coordinated a strategy for a durable political outcome beyond establishing milestones and allocating tasks to donors. The Bonn process called for several steps in the political formation of a new government, and the warlords and elites craftily exploited each one. An Emergency *Loya Jirga* was convened on 7 June 2002 with the purpose of establishing the Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA), to include the presidency and cabinet positions. A proposal to invite the Taliban was floated and quickly rejected.⁷⁸² The stakes were high for warlords and strongmen to consolidate their positions and influence. Their significant wealth and ability to use militia forces for intimidation, due in part to the light footprint international approach, enabled elites to ensure their representatives were present, to buy votes as necessary, and to intimidate opposition.⁷⁸³ The U.S. grew increasingly concerned that former President Burhanuddin Rabbani would try to engineer the *loya jirga* to get himself installed as President.⁷⁸⁴ Former King Zahir Shah appeared to be willing to be selected as head of state, as an ordinary citizen rather than a monarch, but US Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad went to Rome

⁷⁸¹ Rashid (2004).

⁷⁸² Fänge (2012), 2-4.

⁷⁸³ Ruttig (27 April 2012).

⁷⁸⁴ U.S. Embassy Rome Cable, 3 April 2002.

and reportedly arm-twisted the former ruler to drop out and endorse Hamid Karzai.⁷⁸⁵ While the latter was chosen as the leader of the ATA, mainly northern alliance and ISA warlords retained control all but two ministries. Aside from Karzai, southern Pashtuns had little representation in the new government. Feeling marginalized during the proceedings, many southern Pashtuns walked out.⁷⁸⁶ The ATA was responsible for drafting the new constitution, which was to be ratified at a Constitutional *Loya Jirga* in December 2003. Once again, vote buying and intimidation by the warlords ensured the votes went the way they wanted. The new constitution, modeled somewhat after the 1964 Afghan constitution, created highly centralized government with little to no provisions for accountability. The Afghan parliament was given the authority to approve and to impeach ministers, a process that would be later used to extract enormous bribes.⁷⁸⁷ The failure to implement a census, called for in the Bonn Agreement, and a poorly organized voter registration process left elections open to widespread fraud.⁷⁸⁸ The Single Non Transferable Vote system was selected, which favored the better organized warlord parties.⁷⁸⁹ The preamble of the constitution placed the resistance against the Taliban on equal footing with the jihad against the Soviets.⁷⁹⁰ The message to the former was quite clear – the Taliban had no place in the new order.

Believing the victory was won, the debate within the Bush Administration centered on minimizing levels of support to Afghanistan rather on how to secure a durable political

⁷⁸⁵ Ruttig (2012), 3.

⁷⁸⁶ Fänge (2012); *The Guardian* (17 June 2002); Smucker (18 June 2002).

⁷⁸⁷ National Democratic Institute (2006), 2-7.

⁷⁸⁸ Ruttig (2012)

⁷⁸⁹ Ruttig (2012). The SNTV system can be used to fill multiple seats in a single electoral district and can help to ensure better minority representation. It also rewards better organized parties who can earn multiple seats in a single district, while splitting votes of non-party-affiliated candidates.

⁷⁹⁰ The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 26 January 2004; Interviewee J. The “jihad” is associated with the Soviet war, the “resistance” is code for the fight against the Taliban.

outcome. As early as November 2001, the State Department had been calling for international efforts to rebuild Afghanistan, but the Administration wanted to limit the scope of American assistance.⁷⁹¹ In January 2002, President Bush committed to help Afghanistan build its army and national police.⁷⁹² By April 2002 President Bush began to recognize the need to provide more support, “We know that true peace will only be achieved when we give the Afghan people the means to achieve their own aspirations.” He noted later in his memoir, that although the U.S. was not prepared to do nation-building, “We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better.”⁷⁹³ His Administration, however, remained divided.⁷⁹⁴ On 8 April 2002 Rumsfeld wrote to Powell to discourage the latter from further committing American resources to Afghan reconstruction, “The U.S. spent billions of dollars freeing Afghanistan and providing security.... There is no reason on earth for the U.S. to commit to pay 20 percent for the Afghan army. I urge you to get DoS [Department of State] turned around on this – the U.S. position should be zero.”⁷⁹⁵ Powell replied eight days later noting the President’s decision to support Afghan reconstruction and the need for the US to do its “fair share” particularly regarding the Afghan military and police.⁷⁹⁶ The Bush administration hoped that accelerating the development of Afghan security

⁷⁹¹ U.S. Department of State Cable, 3 November 2001.

⁷⁹² The White House, “Joint Statement on New Partnership Between U.S. and Afghanistan,” January 28, 2002. “We [The U.S.] agree that the United States will work with Afghanistan’s friends in the international community to help Afghanistan stand up and train a national military and police, as well as address Afghanistan’s short-term security needs, including through demining assistance.”

⁷⁹³ Bush (2010), 205. According to Woodward (2006, p. 160, 192-3, 220), Bush was adamant from the beginning about humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, but cabinet officials were less enthusiastic.

⁷⁹⁴ Rice (2011), p. 96, 148; Rumsfeld (2011), p. 398; Dobbins (2008), 137. Woodward (2006), 192-5, 220, 237. Rynning (2013), 83-107; Rohde and Sanger (12 August 2007); Dao (April 17 2002); Seth Jones (2009), 116-7.

⁷⁹⁵ The Rumsfeld Papers, Rumsfeld memo to Powell, Rice, “U.S. Financial Commitment,” 8 April 2002b.

⁷⁹⁶ The Rumsfeld papers Powell letter to Rumsfeld, 16 April 2002.

forces would enable the United States to draw down its own forces in Afghanistan more quickly.⁷⁹⁷

In April 2002, the Group of Eight (G8) announced a “lead nation concept” for the Afghan security sector, which entailed five interdependent lines of effort each assigned to a lead donor nation, but without an overarching central authority: Afghan National Army (U.S.), Afghan National Police (Germany), Counter-narcotics (U.K.), judiciary (Italy), Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration [DDR] (Japan).⁷⁹⁸ According to a RAND study on the development of the Afghan security sector, “When U.S. [Security Force Assistance] efforts in Afghanistan were first being planned in 2002, a driving assumption was that the Taliban had been decisively defeated and would not reappear. Instead, the major threat envisioned was a return to the warlordism that had plagued the country in the 1990s and had given rise to the Taliban.”⁷⁹⁹ Minister of Defense Fahim wanted a large, 200,000-man conscript force raised by provincial levy with a handpicked cadre to secure the country and defend its borders.⁸⁰⁰ His rationale was to build ownership in the new Army and state from across the country, while keeping leadership and decision-making in his control. Fearing that a larger, locally recruited military could break-down along ethnic or political lines (while ignoring the fact that warlords still had huge weapons caches and could readily reconstitute their militias), the US sought to limit the size of the Afghan Army to a volunteer force of roughly 50,000. Fahim was forced to accept this and sought to use the opportunity to secure his control.⁸⁰¹ By November 2002, UN Security Council Resolution 1444 called for the establishment of a “fully representative,

⁷⁹⁷ White House (January 28, 2002); *CNN* 17 April 2002; Barno (2007); Farrell (2017), chapter 3.

⁷⁹⁸ Rubin (2013), p. 311-2; Laporte-Shapiro (17 November 2011), 3; Perito (2009), 2.

⁷⁹⁹ Kelly, Bensahel and Oliker, (2011), 5; Howk (2009); see also U.S. Embassy Abu Dhabi Cable, 28 July 2004.

⁸⁰⁰ *The Rumsfeld Papers*, Donald Rumsfeld note to General Franks, “Afghan National Army,” 28 January 2002.

⁸⁰¹ Giustozzi (2003).

professional and multi-ethnic army and police forces,” but little help had been forthcoming.⁸⁰² German efforts to build the police forces proceeded very slowly, planning to train only 1,500 officers in a five-year program.⁸⁰³ Rumsfeld began to get frustrated at the slow pace of the army and police and demanded ways to accelerate the efforts. “There is not a sufficient sense of urgency on the part of anybody,” he complained to Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Myers.⁸⁰⁴

The lead nation concept was quickly and ably exploited by Afghan elites to promote personal and political power. With no overarching strategy or decision-making body that could set priorities, integrate efforts, and mitigate unintended consequences, the efforts of each lead nation were open to manipulation. The coalition military footprint was small, Kabul-based, and commanded by a series of generals who rotated in rapid succession. Fahim engineered recruiting and training efforts to lock in *Shura-e-Nazar* control of the Army and freeze out rivals. Of the first 100 general officers, 90 were from Panjshir.⁸⁰⁵

The Ministry of Interior, meanwhile, was responsible for the police, sub-national governance, and counter-narcotics. The Germans and Americans began to pull the police in different directions – the former toward basic western-style law enforcement, the latter toward a paramilitary role.⁸⁰⁶ Police chief positions went to favored local strongmen or the highest bidder. Governorships were often allocated the same way. This would create perverse incentives for officials to turn a profit on their positions through misappropriation of customs

⁸⁰² United Nations Security Council Resolution 1444, 27 November 2002; Dubik (2009a).

⁸⁰³ The Afghan National Police Working Group (June 2011), 6-7.

⁸⁰⁴ *The Rumsfeld Papers* (May 2, 2003), Donald Rumsfeld letter to Doug Feith and General Myers, “Afghanistan.”; Rumsfeld (2011), 685.

⁸⁰⁵ Giustozzi, (2016), 125-132; O’Brien & Baker (2003).

⁸⁰⁶ Perito (2009).

revenues, aid dollars, or even extortion such as land-theft and kidnapping for ransom.⁸⁰⁷ Afghans perceived these officials were backed by the U.S. military. The absence of any ombudsman or government watch-dog, and perceptions of international acquiescence or complicity, meant people had no avenue to register complaints or air grievances. No lead nation was established to promote sub-national governance, so the international community had little visibility on how well or poorly the new government was connecting to the people outside Kabul. The British counter-narcotics efforts were exploited by local strongmen who directed international eradication efforts at their rivals, while keeping their own crops away from unwanted attention.⁸⁰⁸ The Rule of Law sector did not develop beyond an Italian-written plan that was never implemented. The justice sector positions were often allocated in ways like those used for police chiefs and governors.⁸⁰⁹ Open to bribery, justice would often go to the highest bidder. The disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) efforts by the Japanese were manipulated to quickly bring friendly militias into the army and police while disarming rivals.⁸¹⁰ Each Ministry developed a strong, informal chain of command tied to the major warlords who exercised major influence over key appointments. Successive ministers were never able to assert authority over the army or police, let alone enact tough reforms.”⁸¹¹ Threats of violence and the ability to block policy or legislative action prevented reforms that would damage elite interests.

⁸⁰⁷ The Afghan National Police Working Group (2011), 6-8; Perito (2009); The Royal United Service Institute and the Foreign Policy Research Institute (2009), 7-13; Chayes (2015) 20-38.

⁸⁰⁸ Felbab-Brown (2016), 1, 6-10; Byrd and Mansfield (23 June 2014); Mansfield and Pain (December 2008).

⁸⁰⁹ Singh (2015), 231-255; International Crisis Group (17 November 2010).

⁸¹⁰ See for instance, U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable (15 May 2004); Derksen (May 2015); Ruttig (2012).

⁸¹¹ Sedra, (2003), 34; Guistoizzi (2004), 12-15.

Perhaps most damaging of all, local elites duped US-led counterterrorism efforts into unwittingly targeting personal and political rivals. The United States military was a separate command from ISAF until 2007. It had a wider footprint focused on hunting Taliban and al Qaeda leaders. Afghan elites played on the Americans' dangerous combination of aggressiveness and naiveté, and began manipulating intelligence to use unwitting American forces to settle scores with rivals or to consolidate power.⁸¹² Such military operations, combined with the predatory actions of warlords and strongmen and Afghan police, military or government officials, and reports of torture in American prisons such as Bagram and Guantanamo, caused significant civilian harm. These problems began to foster a sense of alienation and unwanted military occupation – themes the Taliban would ably exploit in their recruiting and propaganda. When directed against community leaders, civilian harm had disproportionately large effects in driving the people away from the government and often into the embrace of armed opposition groups.⁸¹³

The perception, therefore, that post-Taliban Afghanistan was peaceful was an illusion. Many warlords and local strongmen who occupied positions of authority under the new Karzai regime quickly became predatory as they sought to impose and consolidate control. The violence was being perpetrated by the very people who were supposed to be providing security and reporting incidents.⁸¹⁴ “The Taliban insurgency started as a grassroots movement, in reaction to the repression unleashed by Afghan security forces, private militias and Enduring Freedom units in 2002-3,” Antonio Guistozzi wrote in a retrospective assessment to NATO. “Without that repression it is unlikely that the few Taliban leaders who wanted to fight on would have been

⁸¹² Gopal (2014).

⁸¹³ For an in-depth study on how civilian harm affected the war see Kolenda, Reid, and Rogers (2016), 17-28.

⁸¹⁴ Human Rights Watch (July 2003); Derksen (2016).

able to re-engage.”⁸¹⁵ In the face of US resistance, UN envoy Brahimi continued to push in 2002 and 2003 for greater international military presence to protect Afghan civilians from predatory militias. “Skirmishes between local commanders,” he observed in July 2003, “continue to cause civilian casualties in many parts of the country where terrorism is no longer an issue.... There are daily reports of abuses committed by gunmen against the population...all too often – while wielding the formal title of military commander, police or security chief.”⁸¹⁶

US officials did tire of efforts by Fahim to manipulate the development of the nascent Afghan Army while keeping his own large militia.⁸¹⁷ However, some other American officials sent very different messages. In an April 2003 meeting with Karzai, U.S. Congressman Dana Rohrbacher, who had longstanding relationships with the Northern Alliance warlords, encouraged the Afghan President to “integrate” these “ethnic leaders” into the government and to devolve power to them. Karzai reportedly rejected the idea and compared their current actions that were harming the population to the situation in 1994 before the Taliban arose. Rohrbacher reportedly replied that the “wild West” in America was secured by local strongmen and their militias. He also contended that radical Islam and Pashtun nationalism were in league with one another, which seemed to imply that US was at war with both. In yet another stunning statement, the Congressman reportedly told Karzai that the U.S., Saudis and Pakistanis “created” the Taliban to bring law and order to Afghanistan.⁸¹⁸ Karzai must have been deeply troubled by the conversation. He may have perceived that Rohrbacher was expressing true U.S. policy – with respect to empowering the warlords or carving up Afghanistan, the war on

⁸¹⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, “The changing nature of the insurgency,” in *ISAF Strategic Assessment Capability Final Workshop, 10-12 Dec 2014* (Ver. 0.1, January 2015), p. 31.

⁸¹⁶ United Nations News Centre, 31 July 2003. See also Olson (28 March 2002); International Crisis Group (2002); Sipress (20 March 2002).

⁸¹⁷ U.S. Embassy Ottawa Cable, 7 July 2003; Risen and Landler (26 August 2009).

⁸¹⁸ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable, 23 April 2003.

Pashtuns, and the American role in allegedly creating the Taliban. Karzai would, in the future, levy charges against the US on all three counts. American officials would dismiss them as paranoid conspiracy theories.

The former Northern Alliance leaders used their influence with the United States to block Karzai's efforts toward peace. Jim Dobbins and Carter Malkasian describe how the Taliban sent several peace overtures in the early years, even offering to surrender in December 2001.⁸¹⁹ Negotiations were rejected by the U.S. and the Northern Alliance factions in government.⁸²⁰ Secretary of State Colin Powell's suggestion that the U.S. seek talks with moderate Taliban were ridiculed as naïve by Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and ultimately rejected by the Bush Administration.⁸²¹ Rumsfeld flatly rejected Karzai's December 2001 idea that the Taliban be allowed to "live in dignity" in retirement.⁸²² He told Karzai that al Qaeda and Taliban leaders still need to be hunted down. "There are a lot of fanatical people," he concluded, "And we need to finish the job."⁸²³ Brahimi later described this decision to be a fundamental error in the Bonn process.⁸²⁴ Taliban leaders who turned themselves in were sent to prisons in Bagram and Guantanamo, some reportedly tortured. Others were killed or captured in raids. The rest fled to Pakistan.

Conclusion

⁸¹⁹ Dobbins & Malkasian (2015); Knowlton (7 December 2001).

⁸²⁰ Rubin (2007), p. 58.

⁸²¹ Constable (17 October 2001); Filkins (17 October 2001).

⁸²² Knowlton (7 December 2001); Rubin (4 June 2016).

⁸²³ Thom Shanker (17 December 2001).

⁸²⁴ Brahimi (2007), 13.

The lack of strategic thinking about war termination heightened the risk that the successful overthrow of the Taliban would turn into a quagmire. The Bush administration had given detailed attention to the military campaign but wished away the challenges of the aftermath. American officials in Kabul and Washington found themselves completely unprepared for the intense and sometimes violent struggle for control among Afghan elites. “Local elites know how to consolidate power,” observed Lieutenant General Terry A. Wolff, “but not how to build a country.”⁸²⁵ This was particularly true of Afghanistan which had not known political stability since King Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973. The so-called lead nation concept and the tendency of U.S. agencies to operate in bureaucratic silos undermined the woefully under-resourced stabilization effort and left international civilian and military efforts open to manipulation.

The Taliban, in fact, had begun reorganizing as early as 2002.⁸²⁶ Pakistan, appreciating their limited and receding influence in Afghanistan, supported the Taliban’s use of Pakistani territory for sanctuary to foment and sustain an insurgency.⁸²⁷ Prolific military businesses and logistics companies in Pakistan, as well as a secretive intelligence service that operated outside civilian control, gave the Taliban ready access to supplies, logistics, and expertise. The vast refugee camps there offered the potential for substantial recruits. Predatory activities by the government and civilian harm by Afghan and coalition forces provided the opportunity to attract the disaffected groups to the Taliban cause.

The limited U.S. interests in Afghanistan, and the Bush administration’s desire to minimize security and reconstruction commitments, should have led to a more thoughtful discussion with

⁸²⁵ Interview with Lieutenant General Terry A. Wolff.

⁸²⁶ Dobbins & Malkasian (2015)

⁸²⁷ Rubin & Rashid (2008), 37-38.

Karzai about the Taliban's offer to capitulate. The Taliban had little to no leverage – negotiations by competent Afghan and international authorities were highly likely to result in a favorable outcome and could probably have prevented or limited the scale of the insurgency. The Bush administration, however, viewed the Taliban and al Qaeda as one in the same – international terrorist organizations bent on attacking the United States. Given the attacks of September 11 and the way American political leaders framed the conflict, an effort to negotiate with the Taliban in 2001 or 2002 probably would have entailed huge audience costs.

Taliban made another overture in 2004, claimed a former Taliban official who was part of the delegation.⁸²⁸ The Bush Administration still refused. Standing alongside President Karzai in February 2004, Rumsfeld said, "I've not seen any indication that the Taliban pose any military threat to the security of Afghanistan." Karzai, noting that he was being contacted daily by Taliban leaders seeking to be allowed to return home, surmised, "The Taliban doesn't exist anymore. They're defeated. They're gone."⁸²⁹ The 2004 overture would be the Taliban's last for many years.

Had the Bush administration included war termination considerations during strategy development, they still might have come to the view that negotiations with the Taliban were unacceptable. Transition-and-withdraw was another option, and one that the Bush administration backed into as the insurgency fomented. A strategy that considered the requirements in advance for a successful transition would likely have centered on factors such as political legitimacy and inclusiveness, sufficiently capable peacekeeping forces in place until credible local forces were built and trained, civilian protection, and regional cooperation as more important to success than hunting down Taliban remnants. Instead, the latter was

⁸²⁸ Interviewee Y.

⁸²⁹ Sly (27 February 2004).

prioritized over, and even undermined, the others. By 2006, an insurgency that had durable internal and external support was fighting against a predatory, kleptocratic host nation government that was losing legitimacy. The stage was set for an intractable conflict.

Chapter 7: Persisting in a Failing Approach

The U.S. government had not developed a clear and coherent strategy for the war in Afghanistan and was having difficulty understanding and adapting to a deteriorating situation. The Taliban's insurgency, with sanctuary in Pakistan and growing internal and external support, expanded. As we saw in the previous chapter, the civilian harm caused by pro-government predatory militias and coalition forces contributed significantly to the growth and sustainability of the Taliban. High-profile civilian casualty incidents were driving deep wedges between the U.S. and Afghan governments, undermining the legitimacy of both, and antagonizing the Afghan population.⁸³⁰ The insurgency gained strength by 2006 due to increased support in Afghanistan and external backing and sanctuary in Pakistan.⁸³¹ The Afghan government, meanwhile, had self-organized into a predatory kleptocracy that was driving more people into the arms of the Taliban and other militant groups.⁸³² The U.S. approach unwittingly reinforced rather than diminished these problems. American military and civilian officials, however, continued citing myriad examples of progress even as the security situation deteriorated.⁸³³

The ineffective strategy remained in place until 2008, when Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. He campaigned that America needed to withdraw from Iraq and focus instead on Afghanistan. As will be detailed below, he made good on this pledge. He directed a thorough review of the Afghan conflict and opted for a military, civilian, and

⁸³⁰ Kolenda, Reid, and Rogers (2016), 17-28.

⁸³¹ Jones (2009), p. 163-182.

⁸³² Chayes (2015), p. 20-38.

⁸³³ For example, U.S. Department of State, "President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror," February 15, 2007; NATO, "Progress in Afghanistan, Bucharest Summit, 2-4 April 2008. Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates told the House Armed Services committee, "Our progress in Afghanistan is real but fragile" Gates (11 December 2007).

diplomatic surge to reverse a deteriorating situation. To encourage Afghan government reform, Obama put a timeline on American presence. The surge was designed to build Afghan government and security-force capacity, gain Pakistani support in closing insurgent sanctuaries, and degrade the Taliban into a residual insurgency. Despite impressive examples of progress, however, the Afghan government and security forces remained corrupt and unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and insurgent-controlled areas, Pakistan proved unwilling to close insurgent sanctuaries, and the Taliban continued to sustain high levels of violence. Obama clung stubbornly to the withdrawal timeline as the situation deteriorated. By 2015, Obama felt compelled to slow and eventually stop the drawdown.

What Went Wrong?

Why did both administrations persist in strategies that were not succeeding? As with the Iraq case, this question has received little attention. The most common argument is that the Bush administration was distracted by the Iraq war.⁸³⁴ To be sure, that growing debacle began to consume the Bush administration. But the distraction argument presumes that more focus on Afghanistan would have resulted in the necessary modifications to the strategy. As discussed in chapter 4, even the significant energy that the Bush administration gave to Iraq was insufficient to recognize the growing disaster and change course. Outside help was needed. With respect to the Obama administration's strategy, criticism of the White House's timeline has been widespread.⁸³⁵ The military did express concerns that the timeline was more

⁸³⁴ CNN (15 July 2008); Richard A. Clarke (31 December 2006); Rohde and Sanger (12 August 2007); Walt (3 February 2014).

⁸³⁵ Khalilzad (24 March 2016); Miller (15 February 2016). O'Toole (24 March 2015).

aggressive than advised, but ultimately backed the plan.⁸³⁶ The existing scholarship does not address the reasons for the persistent beliefs, shared by the military and State department, that the strategy was working well enough and did not need major modification.

This chapter will demonstrate how confirmation bias, political and bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client difficulties offer important insights on the persistence of ineffective strategies in both administrations. These problems impeded their abilities to recognize that critical strategic factors, such as insurgent sustainability and host nation government's inability to win the battle of legitimacy, were undermining the viability of their strategies. Although both administrations would make changes on the margins, they never properly examined the underlying logic of their approaches. Due to the length of time covered and the complexity of the issues, this chapter will proceed chronologically as a narrative while interweaving the main themes outlined above.

Accelerating Success, 2003-7

American had difficulty modifying its strategy in the early years of the war due to confirmation bias, bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems. After more than a year of bureaucratic infighting over the scale and scope of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan, Rumsfeld finally relented in mid-2003 to a plan drafted by Zalmay Khalilzad called "Accelerating Success." Khalilzad was chosen to be the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan and would have the opportunity to implement his ideas. Overall, the so-called Marshall Plan for Afghanistan amounted to \$1.2 billion in aid (Congress would eventually approve \$1.6 billion). Although acquiescing in greater expenditures for development, Rumsfeld continued to resist further troop increases. He

⁸³⁶ Petraeus (23 June 2011), 18; Mazzetti and Shane (23 June 2011).

reportedly accepted “Accelerating Success” and a larger NATO-run ISAF to extricate the United States from Afghanistan more quickly.⁸³⁷ To enact Khalilzad’s plan the U.S. and NATO began fielding Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) across Afghanistan to implement local assistance projects. USAID was to manage larger infrastructure development.⁸³⁸

“Accelerating Success” gave a much-needed boost in resources, but did not sufficiently address or measure the factors that would pose highest risks to success – an insurgency with durable internal and external support and a host nation government unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested areas. The plan focused on key milestones and developmental efforts. An 18 January 2005 National Security Council memorandum to Principals assessed the progress of Accelerating Success. “The President’s 2004 ‘Accelerating Success in Afghanistan’ initiative,” the memorandum explained, “led to *transformative changes* in governance, security, and reconstruction in Afghanistan” [emphasis added]. The memo lauded the President’s leadership in motivating the interagency, highlighted the development of biweekly program and activity metrics, and explained that a new working group on Afghanistan had improved interagency coordination. It cited as examples of progress the 2004 election, the creation of 19 PRTs, the fielding of a 16,000-strong Afghan Army and a Police force of 25,000, efforts to check warlords, over 25,000 militia troops demobilized, and completion of the Kabul to Kandahar highway. It noted challenges with counter-narcotics, police training, and donors making good on pledges. All metrics were coded “Yellow” which indicated reasons for caution, but there were no red flags.⁸³⁹

⁸³⁷ Farrell (forthcoming 2017), chapter 4; Khalilzad (2016a), 178-180; 183-186; Fairweather (2014), 122; Seth Jones (2009), 139-142

⁸³⁸ Rohde & Sanger (12 August 2007)

⁸³⁹ U.S. National Security Council memorandum (18 January 2005)

The NSC measured government legitimacy positively because voter-turnout in the 2004 election and the assessment that warlord influence was “progressively undercut.” The latter, the memo remarked, were now turning to peaceful politics. Although violence was noted, the NSC memo did not measure the state of the insurgency. Curiously, it claimed that the UN reported improved country-wide access in September 2004 compared to the previous year. A US Government Accountability Office report, however, cites UN maps that show significant deterioration in security for the period covered by the memo.⁸⁴⁰ The NSC document did not assess regional malign activity, despite the existence of insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan. In short, the Administration was grading its own homework.

Reflecting the tendency of the intelligence community to focus its attention on insurgent violence rather than host nation politics, DIA Director Maples noted on 28 February 2006 the “significant progress on the political front” in Afghanistan.⁸⁴¹ Sufficiently confident were they in progress that the Pentagon suggested at the Berlin Conference in September 2005 to withdraw up to 4,000 US forces and replace them with NATO troops.⁸⁴² “It makes sense that as NATO forces go in,” Gen. John P. Abizaid, the head the United States Central Command, reportedly told the New York Times, “that we could drop some of the U.S. requirements.”⁸⁴³ The Pentagon eventually scrubbed the withdrawal plan due to NATO objections.

As in Iraq, major risks were developing along the seams and fault lines between bureaucratic silos.⁸⁴⁴ The tendency to measure progress within each silo reinforced confirmation bias that

⁸⁴⁰ For the UN Security Risk Maps see US Government Accountability Office, *GAO-05-742* (July 2005), 56.

⁸⁴¹ U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee (28 February 2006), p. 8

⁸⁴² Rohde & Sanger (12 August 2007)

⁸⁴³ Schmitt and Cloud (14 September 2005).

⁸⁴⁴ For definitions of seams and fault lines due to bureaucratic silos see Chapter 2.

the war was on track and masked the emerging strategic risks. The achievements to date were certainly impressive, given the state of catastrophe in Afghanistan after over twenty years of war. Other indicators, however, were present that should have led the Bush administration to question its optimistic assessments. The previous chapter noted the widespread violence on the part of various warlords who aimed to consolidate and expand their control, to include their use of predatory militias and manipulation of international forces and officials.⁸⁴⁵ Karzai was caught in an extraordinarily difficult position. Nearly every Afghan leader over the past century had been overthrown or murdered. Karzai's political rivals controlled the security forces. International military forces, in a bit of mirror imaging, mostly found themselves incapable of conceiving a military not fully accepting civilian control – or military leaders that had interests other than selfless service to their country.⁸⁴⁶ Warlords could also mobilize well-armed militias rapidly and organize street protests. Both the Pentagon and State continued to underestimate the importance of these internal dynamics and multi-faceted patron-client issues.⁸⁴⁷

Karzai's best hope to keep them in check was political support – with military backing – by the international community and specifically the United States. Little was forthcoming. The United States refused to support him in a 2002 effort to take on a threat from eastern warlord Pacha Khan Zadran.⁸⁴⁸ A year later, Rumsfeld was adamant to CENTCOM Commander John Abizaid, Zalmay Khalilzad and others, “We do not want him making moves [against warlords] under the mistaken belief that we are going to back him up militarily.”⁸⁴⁹ International officials

⁸⁴⁵ See also Khalilzad (2016 kindle edition), 2618 of 7203.

⁸⁴⁶ Felbab-Brown (2 August 2012); Singh (2014), 621-650.

⁸⁴⁷ Interview with former SRAP senior advisor Barnett R. Rubin.

⁸⁴⁸ Khalilzad (2016 kindle edition), 2618 of 7203. See also *The Rumsfeld Papers*, Donald Rumsfeld letter to Douglas Feith and Condolizee Rice (1 April 2002); and Office of Secretary of Defense, “Principles for Afghanistan: Policy Guidelines” (7 July 2003), 2.

⁸⁴⁹ Rumsfeld to Abizaid, “Karzai's Strategy on Warlordism” *Rumsfeld Papers*, 15 September 2003.

would continue to press Karzai to make reforms and keep the warlords in check, but provided no clear backing or muscle to help him manage the fall-out. Nonetheless, Karzai took the bold step of selecting Ahmad Zia Massoud rather than Fahim as his first vice presidential running mate for the 2004 elections, which caused significant tensions.⁸⁵⁰ After winning the election in 2004, Karzai removed several warlords and their lieutenants from ministerial positions, to include replacing Fahim at Ministry of Defense with his deputy Rahim Wardak.⁸⁵¹

The 2005 parliamentary elections, however, would offer the warlords new opportunities for political influence. In May 2005 protests erupted across Afghanistan, instigated by a *Newsweek* article that alleged interrogators at US military prison at Guantanamo had desecrated the Koran.⁸⁵² Due in part to this instability, the September 2005 parliamentary elections were a major victory for warlords and local strongmen.⁸⁵³ They could use parliamentary action to block legislative efforts that might undermine their influence. Rather than turning their attention to peaceful politics, the warlords used the elections to expand their means of control.⁸⁵⁴ The U.S. had made it clear that Karzai could not count on the international military to help him disarm and impose his will on the warlords. Karzai was forced to undertake efforts that kept the international community happy while balancing the interests of dangerous elites.

⁸⁵⁰ Gall (26 July 2004 and 27 July 2004); Pannier (26 July 2004); Constable (29 May 2004).

⁸⁵¹ U.S. Embassy Brussels Cable, 21 Jan 2005; Katzman (28 December 2004), 14-16.

⁸⁵² Gall (13 May 2005); Aizenman and Wright (14 May 2005); Human Rights Watch (24 May 2005); Kolhatkar and Ingalls (2006), 117-168; Rohde & Sanger (12 August 2007); Human Rights Watch (July 2006), 13-17; Campbell (13 July 2004); Cooperation for Peace and Unity (May 2005).

⁸⁵³ Wilder (December 2005); Marquardt (17 November 2005); Lansford (2012), 146; National Democratic Institute (2006).

⁸⁵⁴ Interview with Barnett R. Rubin.

These factors, Sarah Chayes argues, began to provide the perverse incentives that would turn the Afghan government into a predatory kleptocracy.⁸⁵⁵ The milestone-centric approach to political and economic development was easily captured by Afghan elites who quickly froze-out their rivals while the international community lauded the progress. Elites super-empowered by their proximity to the United States gained significant political and economic power, backed up by the military muscle of local militias, police, or unwitting coalition forces. Government, police, and military positions were increasingly for sale at exorbitant prices. Officials would purchase their positions from elites in Kabul, in return for license to make the money back and turn a profit. International aid and development dollars, customs revenues, black market racketeering were all eligible for extortion. A 2008 report by Oxfam found that barely 15 percent of international aid dollars made it to the local levels.⁸⁵⁶ More problematically, some officials would engage in land theft, kidnapping for ransom, and other forms of extortion, seemingly backed by coalition military might. “You Americans are either too stupid to realize you are being used in this way,” an Afghan elder explained to me, “or you are complicit.”⁸⁵⁷ As in Iraq, well-meaning efforts by agencies or lead nations self-synchronized in damaging ways. The whole was perpetually less than the sum of its parts.

It is no wonder, then, that the political instability and major Taliban offensives in 2006 came as such a shock to the Bush Administration. Karzai’s tone, as seen in reporting cables from the American diplomats, grew deeply suspicious and pessimistic that year. He suspected some of the warlords were fomenting violence to destabilize his government. Angry anti-U.S. demonstrations in Kabul erupted on 29 May 2006, after a road traffic accident in which an

⁸⁵⁵ Chayes (2015), 3-66, 135-155.

⁸⁵⁶ See Matt Waldman (March 2008), 11.

⁸⁵⁷ Discussion with Afghan elders, August 2009, Kabul.

American military vehicle plowed into a dozen civilian ones. 14 civilians were reportedly killed and 90 injured during the riots.⁸⁵⁸ The demonstrations came on the heels of an incident in Kandahar in which 35 civilians were reported killed.⁸⁵⁹ “If it had been Taliban or al-Qai’ida,” Karzai explained darkly, “the bombs [in Kabul] would have been more effective.”⁸⁶⁰ Other anti-American protests erupted in February and September 2006 over cartoons in a Danish newspaper and an American film, respectively, that mocked the Prophet Mohammad.⁸⁶¹ Major problems in governance continued, to include predatory behavior by Afghan officials.⁸⁶² Karzai worried that his government and the coalition were losing the support of the people.⁸⁶³ To reduce the internal tensions, he began to slow-roll disarming some militias and to bring more warlords into the cabinet.⁸⁶⁴

Meanwhile, the Taliban initiated large-scale military offensives, particularly in southern Afghanistan.⁸⁶⁵ Retired U.S. General Barry R. McCaffrey, in a June 2006 assessment for Rumsfeld, was alarmed by the deteriorating security situation.⁸⁶⁶ An August 2006 security assessment on southern Afghanistan that was given to President Karzai noted, “The Taliban are becoming increasingly willing to defend key terrain with large sophisticated, well-armed

⁸⁵⁸ Gall (30 May 2006).

⁸⁵⁹ *The Guardian* (22 May 2006).

⁸⁶⁰ U.S. Embassy Dushanbe Cable, 28 July 2006.

⁸⁶¹ Witte and Nakashima (7 February 2006); Harooni (17 September 2006).

⁸⁶² U.S. Embassy Kabul Cables, 14 March 2006; 17 April 2006; July 17, 2006; 6 September 2006.

⁸⁶³ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable, 21 August 2006.

⁸⁶⁴ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable, 10 Jan 2006. See also Fairweather (2014 kindle edition), location 140-162 of 9507.

⁸⁶⁵ Gall (11 June 2006).

⁸⁶⁶ Donald Rumsfeld to General Peter Pace, “General McCaffrey’s Report on Afghanistan” *Rumsfeld Papers*, 15 June 2006.

groups of fighters.”⁸⁶⁷ Afghan and Indian officials had been warning American officials since 2005 that Pakistan was actively supporting the insurgency.⁸⁶⁸ The evidence for the scale and scope of Pakistani complicity were not disclosed in reporting cables, but the existence of sanctuary in Pakistan from which the Taliban were able to plan, coordinate logistics, train and recruit, was clear.⁸⁶⁹ By 2006, Karzai’s tone on Pakistan had moved from conciliation to hostility.⁸⁷⁰ This served to bring the Afghan government closer to India, likely reinforcing Pakistan’s fear of a hostile Afghanistan and creating a downward spiral of mutual suspicion and antagonism.⁸⁷¹ In November 2006, DIA Director Maples forecasted that insurgent attacks in 2006 were likely to be twice as high as 2005. He also revised his previously optimistic assessment of Afghan governance. “Nearly five years after the Taliban’s fall,” Maples testified, “many Afghans expected the situation to be better by now and are beginning to blame President Karzai. These unrealized expectations are likely contributing to an erosion of support for his administration.”⁸⁷²

Such problems should have led Bush administration officials to question the assumptions underpinning their strategy. In response to the growing challenges, however, the U.S. and Afghan governments and international community sought to improve coordination and levels of support. The London Compact of February 2006 called for an expansion of the Afghan

⁸⁶⁷ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable (21 August 2006)

⁸⁶⁸ U.S. Embassy New Delhi Cable (5 July 2005); U.S. Embassy New Delhi Cable (14 July 2005); Rohde & Sanger (12 August 2007)

⁸⁶⁹ Rubin & Rashid (2008), p. 35-38; *New York Times* “Afghanistan’s Forgotten War” (5 August 2005).

⁸⁷⁰ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cables, 17 April 2006; 2 May 2006; 15 June 2006; 19 September 2006.

⁸⁷¹ U.S. Embassy New Delhi Cable, 1 May 2006.

⁸⁷² Senate Armed Services Committee, “The Current Situation in Iraq and Afghanistan,” Lieutenant General Michael D. Maples (15 November 2006), 7

Army from 34,000 to 70,000 by the end of 2010.⁸⁷³ By that time, the Army and Police were to be able to secure the country and allow international forces to withdraw. Governance, anti-corruption, rule of law, and myriad other reforms were to be achieved by then as well, but no conditions were attached to the benchmarks.⁸⁷⁴ The commitments for reform were aspirational. To improve coordination on the ground, Karzai agreed in August 2006 to the “Afghan Development Zone” (ADZ) concept, developed by the ISAF commander, British General David Richards. The ADZ, the American Ambassador noted, “attempts to unify security and development efforts from the GOA and IC ... and should expand to encompass ever widening territories.”⁸⁷⁵ The underlying assumption was that projects and “service-delivery” rather than good governance were the key to restoring public confidence in the government.

In the absence of clear guidance from Washington, the U.S. Embassy and military command in Afghanistan published a “Strategic Directive for Afghanistan” on 11 September 2006, signed by US Ambassador Ronald Neumann and Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry. The intention was to better integrate American civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan. The country team outlined its strategic goal as “[c]reate a self-reliant Afghanistan that provides effective governance; is self-securing, committed to representative government, economically viable, and rejects narco-production.” The military identified its primary task as “defeat insurgent and terrorist threats and establish effective, adequate security.” Success, they noted, will be achieved when “insurgents are defeated and no longer threaten internal development nor the safety and security of Afghanistan,” and “the ANSF are capable of effectively securing

⁸⁷³ The U.S. continued wanting to limit the Army to a “more sustainable” 50,000.

⁸⁷⁴ The London Conference on Afghanistan, “The London Compact” (31 January – 1 February 2006), 6-8. In the event, barely any of the milestones would be met by the end of 2010 or even the end of 2014.

⁸⁷⁵ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable (21 August 2006)

their territory against insurgent and criminal threats with only limited coalition support.”⁸⁷⁶

The document specified lines of effort related to security, governance, development, and strategic communications and portrayed how they all point to a self-reliant Afghanistan.

The directive noted that the 34,000-strong ANA would double in size to 70,000 and be capable of operating independently by fiscal year 2011. With more resources, they argued, the ANA could achieve that milestone by 2009. A police force of roughly 80,000 would be merely one year behind.⁸⁷⁷ The military command made these aggressive forecasts even though the international training mission for the Afghan Army and Police were, as McCaffrey described in a June 2006 assessment read by Rumsfeld, chronically and “miserably” under-resourced.⁸⁷⁸ The commonly used rule of thumb was 20 military or police for every 1000 people.⁸⁷⁹ With a population of roughly 30 million, Afghanistan would require a security force 600,000-strong. Barely one-third of that number of Afghan and international forces was forecasted to be available by 2009. The small army and police were justified by U.S. military officials based on comparisons with the security forces of neighboring states, none of them in the grip of an insurgency.⁸⁸⁰ In spite of General McCaffrey’s alarming report, Rumsfeld only asked Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace to look into the reported lack of effective small arms for the ANA and whether the ANSF should be bigger.⁸⁸¹ The Pentagon

⁸⁷⁶ Neumann and Eikenberry (11 September 2006), 5-7.

⁸⁷⁷ Neumann and Eikenberry (11 September 2006), 52, 55. See also Office of Security Cooperation – Afghanistan (3 September 2005), 3-15, 18-21.

⁸⁷⁸ McCaffrey (2006).

⁸⁷⁹ James Dobbins et al (2003), 25- 26, Figure S-2; *JP 3-24*, 1-13, para. 1-67.

⁸⁸⁰ Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (21 February 2007), slides 4-8.

⁸⁸¹ Donald Rumsfeld to General Peter Pace, “General McCaffrey’s Report on Afghanistan” *Rumsfeld Papers*, 15 June 2006.

reportedly forecasted in 2006 that the Afghan government would not be able to fund an Army of only 50,000 until 2063.⁸⁸²

Failing to Keep Pace with the Insurgency, 2007-9

Confirmation bias, bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems continued to undermine the Bush administration's ability to make critically-needed changes in strategy. In September 2006, as Karzai was heading to Washington, D.C. to meet with President Bush, Ambassador Ron Neumann noted that the Afghan president "is at the lowest point of public confidence in his government. A deteriorating security situation, coupled with rampant corruption at all levels, has sapped confidence and feeds public perceptions of a weak government and governance system." The Ambassador also cited the problems with Pakistan and the nexus of corruption, narcotics, and insecurity. He advised Bush to improve funding for Afghanistan, increase the size of the security forces, and urge Karzai to "do more" on corruption and narcotics. "We, in turn, must recognize he is not strong enough and Afghanistan not stable enough for him to do these things without our encouragement, our occasional pressure, and a lot of our money and force to back him up."⁸⁸³

Bush took stock of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the fall of 2006. He fundamentally changed the strategy in Iraq, as noted in Chapter 4. For Afghanistan, he simply provided more resources. "Today, five short years later, the Taliban have been driven from power, al Qaeda has been driven from its camps, and Afghanistan is free." President Bush announced in a February 2007 speech on Afghanistan. "That's why I say we have made remarkable progress."

⁸⁸² Serchuck (2 June 2006).

⁸⁸³ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable (19 September 2006)

Nonetheless, he noted the significant Taliban offensives in 2006, and decided to increase support to Afghanistan even as he was surging military forces in Iraq. He outlined five major capacity-building efforts: increase the size of the Afghan Army from 32,000 to 70,000; strengthen the NATO force in Afghanistan (to include an increase of U.S. forces); build provincial government capacity and develop local economies; reduce poppy cultivation; and help Karzai fight corruption, especially in the justice sector. He added a sixth effort, which was to work with Pakistani President Musharraf to defeat terrorists and extremists in Pakistan.⁸⁸⁴

Confirmation bias reinforced the Bush administration's tendency to overestimate the legitimacy of the Afghan government and underestimate the growing strength of the Taliban. They misdiagnosed the problem in Afghanistan as one of inadequate capacity. Warning signs of an increasingly capable insurgency with external sanctuary and a predatory, corrupt Afghan government, were met with more resources but not a new approach. Exploitable bureaucratic silos and patron-client problems meant that more resources were at high risk of elite capture. Without major changes to address such problems that were placing success at increasing risk, more resources might even make corruption worse. Interests and incentives with Pakistan, which was designated by the United States as a major non-NATO ally in 2004, were misaligned, too. A Pakistani military offensive to eliminate Afghan Taliban sanctuaries could theoretically bring about an end to the insurgency, but Musharraf was not about to go to war with a group that was advancing Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan even as they undermined American interests there and conducted operations that killed American soldiers.⁸⁸⁵ Musharraf, instead, used U.S. funding to support operations against the Pakistani Taliban.⁸⁸⁶

⁸⁸⁴ George W. Bush, "President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan" (February 15, 2007)

⁸⁸⁵ Nasr (2013), 17.

⁸⁸⁶ Fair (15 May 2015); Craig and DeYoung (20 August 2015); *Gandhara* (5 August 2016).

Despite Bush's desire to increase support, by August 2007 the U.S. training teams fielded only 1,000 of the 2,400 trainers required. The NATO teams were even worse: of the 70 teams needed, only 20 had been fielded. The ANA had only 53% of the equipment deemed critical by CSTC-A (Combined Security Training Command – Afghanistan).⁸⁸⁷ By June 2008 only 2 of 105 Afghan Army units were rated as fully capable.⁸⁸⁸ The Afghan police were in even worse condition.⁸⁸⁹ CSTC-A revised their readiness forecast by only one year in 2008, noting the army and police would be “fully capable” by the end of 2011.⁸⁹⁰ When Lieutenant General James Dubik conducted a CENTCOM-directed assessment of the ANSF in 2008, he found that their slow rate of growth was unable to keep pace with the growing insurgency.⁸⁹¹

As the Taliban threat and U.S. resources grew, so did the scale of corruption. In 2005 Afghanistan ranked 117 out of 158 in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. By 2009, it vaulted to 179 out of 180, behind only Somalia.⁸⁹² Afghanistan expert Astri Suhrke blames the growth in corruption on international community largesse, “The money flow simply overwhelmed the country's social and institutional capacity to deal with it in a legal and socially acceptable manner.”⁸⁹³ This argument presumes that international aid bespoke to

⁸⁸⁷ RAND (2011), p. 35 – 45; U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Afghanistan Security: Further Congressional Action May Be Needed to Ensure Completion of a Detailed Plan to Develop and Sustain Capable Afghan National Security Forces,” *GAO-08-661*, pp. 11, 27-30

⁸⁸⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *GAO-08-661*, p. 3.

⁸⁸⁹ Bayley and Perito (2010), 22; Kelly, Bensahel, Olikier (2011), 50; U.S. Government Accountability Office, *GAO-08-661*, 4.

⁸⁹⁰ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *GAO-08-661*, 17.

⁸⁹¹ Interview with LTG James Dubik.

⁸⁹² Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index” 2005 & 2009.

⁸⁹³ Suhrke (2012), 133.

Afghanistan's "absorptive capacity" would have been used for its intended purposes and excess would not have been available for misappropriation.

The patron-client challenges discussed in Chapter 2 cast doubts upon this premise. Sarah Chayes, for instance, illustrates that the government had self-organized into a vertically integrated kleptocracy. As noted above, government positions were sold by power-brokers in Kabul at increasingly high prices. In exchange, officials were given license to recoup the money and turn a profit – many using predatory practices to do so. An official who could not or would not pay would lose the job.⁸⁹⁴ Even if international aid and contracts had been calibrated to Afghanistan's "absorptive capacity" the primary incentive for most government officials was sustaining the kleptocracy, not serving the people.⁸⁹⁵ DoD's 1230 report in January 2009 cites data showing governance getting worse from 2006 to 2008.⁸⁹⁶ By 2010, according to a United Nations report, corruption had eclipsed insecurity and unemployment as the greatest concern among Afghans.⁸⁹⁷ Annual surveys showed an overwhelming majority of Afghans viewed corruption as a major problem in their everyday lives.⁸⁹⁸ A highly sophisticated kleptocracy and international largesse became mutually reinforcing. Officials and power-brokers insatiable demand for money and power were sapping the legitimacy of the government and international community. The predatory nature of the government and associated warlords led more Afghans to withhold their support or even transfer it to the

⁸⁹⁴ Chayes (2015), p. 59.

⁸⁹⁵ This is a common problem within the developing world. See Collier (2007) & (2009), and Diamond (2008).

⁸⁹⁶ 1230 Report (January 2009), 61.

⁸⁹⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (January 2010).

⁸⁹⁸ Asia Foundation (2010), 3, 6, 85-90.

Taliban.⁸⁹⁹ Civilian casualties by international forces continued to undermine the international mission. UNAMA attributed 39% of the civilian fatalities in 2008 to international forces.⁹⁰⁰

Bush had fundamentally changed the strategy in Iraq, but not in Afghanistan. Iraq was unravelling rapidly. Afghanistan was a slow, less perceptible, failure. Confirmation bias had led to a dangerous complacency about the prospects of success as American officials fixated on examples of progress.⁹⁰¹ The tendency to operate in bureaucratic silos created seams that were being ably exploited by Afghan elites and fault lines that were interacting in destructive ways. Military efforts were damaging governance and legitimacy; political milestones were captured by elites; diplomatic efforts resulted in Pakistan being awarded Major non-NATO ally status despite their support for the Taliban, which reinforced Karzai's cynicism and India's alarm. Patron-client challenges reinforced these problems. The United States had not developed a coordinated strategy with the Afghan or Pakistani governments. The interests and incentives remained dangerously misaligned. The lack of conditionality reinforced tendencies toward political instability and kleptocracy in Afghanistan, and double-dealing by Pakistan. The harder the international community tried to fight and to spend its way out of the problems, the more deeply it was sucked into the quagmire.⁹⁰²

2009 Assessments: The Good War Going Badly

⁸⁹⁹ Nasr (2013), 19; Kolenda, Reid, and Rogers (2016), 17-28; Gopal (2014).

⁹⁰⁰ UNAMA (2009), ii. Kolenda, Reid and Rogers (2016), 17.

⁹⁰¹ For example, U.S. Department of State "President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan" (February 15, 2007); NATO, "Progress in Afghanistan" (2008); The Committee On Armed Services United States Senate (March 22, 2012)

⁹⁰² This cycle is part of the reason highly fragile states rarely become self-reliant. See Pritchett, Woolcock, and Andrews (December 2010).

As is often the case, a change in Administration was necessary for a change in strategy. The Obama changes, however, were more significant in scale than approach. Cognitive bias, bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems continued to impede the U.S. government's ability to recognize the limited prospects for a successful transition to Afghan government lead in the war. Obama campaigned that Afghanistan was the good war – a war of necessity, while Iraq was the war of choice.⁹⁰³ One of his first acts as President was to order an interagency review of the war in Afghanistan, led by former CIA official and South Asia expert Bruce Reidel. The process served to concentrate the minds of senior Administration officials and bring a common appreciation of the challenges. Reidel's report outlined that the situation in Afghanistan was worse than expected. Afghanistan and Pakistan, it argued, should be a single integrated theater; the success of one country was tied to the success of the other. The United States needed a stronger relationship with Pakistan to change its strategic calculus away from the use of militant groups to advance its interests. The report called for a more effectively resourced counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, to include holding President Karzai accountable for dealing with corruption. It also supported an Afghan-led reconciliation effort. President Obama outlined these findings in a 27 March 2009 speech and approved ISAF Commander General David McKiernan's request for 17,000 more American troops.⁹⁰⁴

Obama also made key personnel decisions. He directed Secretary of State Clinton to create a Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) and selected veteran diplomat Richard Holbrooke for the position. Soon, other international partners created similar positions. The Director of the Joint Staff, Lt. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, created the Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell (PACC) to improve the effectiveness of the Joint Staff's efforts.

⁹⁰³ Nasr (2013), 13-14.

⁹⁰⁴ The White House, "Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," 27 March 2009.

Gates, who had been kept on as Secretary of Defense by Obama, picked former deputy chief of mission to Afghanistan, David Sedney, to lead an upgraded Afghanistan-Pakistan-Central Asia office, and appointed former CIA operative during the Afghan-Soviet war Michael Vickers, as the Assistance Secretary for Special Operations. Not satisfied with how McKiernan was responding to the new direction, Gates relieved him in favor of McChrystal. As the new commander was leaving for Kabul, Gates directed him to provide, within 60 days, an assessment of the war considering the President's new direction and to inform him of any additional resources required.⁹⁰⁵

McChrystal's assessment described the situation as "serious and deteriorating."⁹⁰⁶ The Taliban and other insurgent groups had sanctuary in Pakistan and were threatening Kandahar and several critical locations across the country.⁹⁰⁷ They were tightening their grip in the provinces and districts around Kabul. The Afghan government was weak and corrupt. The international effort was disjointed, ineffective, and creating animosity among the population. To be successful, the assessment argued, ISAF would need to address two critical threats: a growing insurgency and a crisis in confidence in the coalition and Afghan government. Success was achievable, McChrystal noted, but not by "doubling down" on the same ways of doing business. A fundamentally different approach was needed. This included protecting the civilian population from harm by the Taliban and the Afghan government. He emphasized that responsible and accountable governance should be on par in priority with security. Without the former, security was not possible. He called for much greater unity of effort, both within the military coalition and with the civilian efforts of the U.S. and international community. The

⁹⁰⁵ McChrystal directed me to lead a team of civilian and military experts and draft the strategic assessment.

⁹⁰⁶ McChrystal (2009) COMISAF Initial Assessment, 1-1; McChrystal (2013), 292-315; Gates (2014), 367-368.

⁹⁰⁷ Forsberg (December 2009).

coalition, he recommended, should promote conflict resolution efforts, such as reintegration and reconciliation.⁹⁰⁸

The Assessment outlined five strategic risks: 1) the loss of coalition will and support; 2) lack of Afghan government political will to enact needed reforms; 3) failure by ISAF partners to provide adequate civilian capabilities to support good governance and economic development; 4) significant adaptations by insurgent groups; 5) external malign activity from Pakistan and Iran.⁹⁰⁹ All five were clear and present problems; the magnitude of risks 2, 3, and 5 were becoming increasingly obvious.⁹¹⁰ These are also examples of problems that tend to fall in the seams between bureaucratic silos. At no time was any American official held responsible or accountable to address them. The assessment did not address directly the question of war termination.⁹¹¹

McChrystal provided periodic updates on the assessment to Gates, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, and Central Command's General David Petraeus. Recognizing that any discussions over troop increases would be contentious, Gates directed McChrystal not to provide a resource recommendation until the assessment was fully considered by the NSC.⁹¹² The assessment, however, was leaked to the Washington Post soon after being sent to Gates.⁹¹³ The issue of "more resources" was already being discussed by pundits in Washington, to include by some civilian members of the assessment team after they

⁹⁰⁸ McChrystal (2009), COMISAF, Initial Assessment; 1-1 to 1-4, 2-1 to 2-15; McChrystal (2013), 316-338; Seth Jones (2011), ix.

⁹⁰⁹ McChrystal (2009), COMISAF, Initial Assessment, 2-22.

⁹¹⁰ For an analysis of the Assessment and its process see Brand (2011).

⁹¹¹ As the leader of the strategic assessment team and drafter of the document's core ideas and recommendations, I accept my own responsibility for that shortcoming.

⁹¹² McChrystal (2013), 331.

⁹¹³ Schmitt and Shanker (21 September 2009).

returned home.⁹¹⁴ The leak of the document made clear that the military would put a major request for more troops on the table. The White House, already suspicious of the military, believed the Pentagon was using leaks to force the President to approve a troop surge lest he be seen to be acting contrary to field recommendations and military advice. The leak of the Assessment, which was not caused by McChrystal or his staff, exacerbated the suspicion into mistrust.⁹¹⁵ These internal bureaucratic and principal-agent problems set the stage for a civil-military crisis in June 2010 when a *Rolling Stone* article reported disparaging remarks by McChrystal's staff about the President.⁹¹⁶

As the NSC reviewed the assessment, Gates directed McChrystal to develop resourcing options. McChrystal offered three of them at low, medium, and high risk: 80,000, 40,000, and 20,000, respectively.⁹¹⁷ Equally important, he urged, was a significant increase in intelligence capabilities, civilian expertise, development assistance, and a doubling of the size and capability of the Afghan National Security Forces. The administration deliberated from August until late November.⁹¹⁸

These discussions took place in the wake of the 20 August 2009 presidential elections. Convinced that good governance was impossible under another Karzai term, Holbrooke

⁹¹⁴ Chandrasekaran (31 July 2009); Baker and Filkins (31 August 2009); McChrystal (2013), 344-5.

⁹¹⁵ Personal knowledge as lead of the assessment team. We put the early drafts of the assessment on a NATO computer system and carefully restricted access to prevent leaks. McChrystal sent the assessment to Defense senior leaders using a classified U.S. email system after the 20 August Presidential election. The assessment was leaked in late September 2009 and published by the Washington Post on 21 September. Many Defense senior leaders give members of their personal staff access to their email. For an article speculating on the leak see Smith (22 September 2009); Gates ((2014), 367), said he was told that someone on McChrystal's staff leaked the assessment.

⁹¹⁶ Hastings (22 June 2010).

⁹¹⁷ McChrystal (2013), 345-6.

⁹¹⁸ For a description of the painstaking process see Nasr (2013), 22-25.

actively promoted Karzai's rivals, particularly former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah.⁹¹⁹ Karzai suspected this and began accusing Holbrooke of interfering in the election.⁹²⁰ Karzai won 55% of the initial tally to Abdullah's 28%.⁹²¹ Abdullah refused to accept the results and accused Karzai of widespread fraud, claims for which ample evidence was found.⁹²² Holbrooke and UNAMA deputy Peter Galbraith pushed hard for the internationally-staffed Electoral Complaints Commission to investigate. Galbraith was fired after accusing UNAMA chief Kai Eide of a cover up.⁹²³ The Electoral Complaints Commission declared roughly one million ballots to be fraudulent. This put Karzai's percentage just below 50%, triggering a run-off between the top two candidates. Karzai refused Abdullah's entreaties and American suggestions for a power-sharing deal.⁹²⁴ By November, a frustrated Abdullah declined to participate in the run-off, ceding the election to Karzai.⁹²⁵ Obama reportedly called Karzai afterward and lectured him to do more about corruption.⁹²⁶ In his inaugural speech, Karzai called for transition to Afghan-led security to begin within two years, for Afghan forces to take over security responsibility by the end of 2014, and for international forces by then to be reduced and limited to training and support roles.⁹²⁷ Having been criticized for getting nothing

⁹¹⁹ Holbrooke would publicly deny these allegations from Karzai and others, but Holbrooke's efforts were confirmed by Defense Secretary Robert Gates in his memoirs - Gates (2014), 340-1; 358-9; McChrystal (2013), 342-343; U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable, 3 September 2009.

⁹²⁰ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable, 7 July 2009.

⁹²¹ See Carter, Ericson and Tse (16 October 2009).

⁹²² U.S. Embassy Kabul Cable, 10 September 2009.

⁹²³ Tavernise and Wafa (11 October 2009).

⁹²⁴ U.S. Embassy Kabul Cables, 16 October 2009; 6 October 2009; 20 October 2009; 21 October 2009; 26 October 2009; 27 October 2009; 28 October 2009; 31 October 2009; 1 November 2009.

⁹²⁵ For an analysis of the election see National Democratic Institute (2010).

⁹²⁶ Cooper and Zeleny (2 November 2009).

⁹²⁷ Rubin and Landler (19 November 2009). Interviewee L suggests that the United States recommended this language to Karzai.

out of the elections dispute in terms of jobs for his supporters, Abdullah and his supporters would increase their brinksmanship in the disputed election of 2014, to which the U.S. responded by forcing a power-sharing deal.⁹²⁸

The mess surrounding the elections intensified the debate in Washington over McChrystal's requests for more resources.⁹²⁹ Eikenberry cabled that a surge would be a mistake because Karzai was an "unreliable partner" who lacked the political will to reform.⁹³⁰ Vice President Biden continued to advocate for a smaller-footprint counter-terrorism mission (dubbed "CT-plus").⁹³¹ Obama was reportedly upset that the military only offered options in terms of troop numbers.⁹³² He believed the Pentagon was trying to box him in to approve a large troop surge. Only the military, though, was asked to provide options.⁹³³ No one sought, and no agency provided, options that placed diplomatic efforts (such as reconciliation) or political efforts (such as addressing governance and corruption) as the priority with the military in support.

Afghanistan, moreover, was not being considered in isolation. Obama wanted to wind down both wars so he could resource his domestic agenda, to include a major national health-care initiative, addressing massive budget deficits, and bringing the economy out of recession after the 2008 banking crisis. Expanding the war in Afghanistan even further than he already had could inhibit those priorities. Seeking to limit the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan and to send a signal to Karzai to get serious about reform, the Obama administration began debating a timeline to withdraw troops. Alternatives to encourage reform, such as conditionality, were not

⁹²⁸ Nordlund (20 September 2014).

⁹²⁹ For descriptions of the process see McChrystal (2013), 354-7; Gates (2014), 370-385; Nasr (2013), 28.

⁹³⁰ Bumiller and Landler (11 November 2009).

⁹³¹ Peter Baker (13 October 2009).

⁹³² Interviewee L; Landler (1 January 2017).

⁹³³ Interviewees L, M, N, P, and X.

addressed. Pressed on the timeline, the military deferred to its recent experience in Iraq as a gauge for when clear results might be seen.⁹³⁴ Based on advice from the uniformed military, Gates suggested that areas cleared of the Taliban could be transitioned to the Afghan government within two years.⁹³⁵ The reliance on this *availability heuristic* gave the White House an anchor point to narrow the timeline discussion toward a July 2011 consensus for withdrawing the surge forces.⁹³⁶

No methods for achieving a favorable and durable outcome other than transition-and-withdraw were examined.⁹³⁷ The questions for debate were limited to the scale of the surge and its timeline. The military was to attrite the Taliban and expand the ANSF while the civilians built government capacity and diplomats convinced Pakistan to pressure and eventually shut down insurgent sanctuaries.⁹³⁸ The Obama administration believed these efforts would reduce the Taliban to a residual insurgency by the end of 2014. At that point, the insurgency could be defeated by the ANSF. With decisive victory now ruled out, the administration adopted a transition strategy on an aggressive timeline. No one addressed the probability of successfully addressing the problems of government legitimacy and insurgent sustainability (to include sanctuaries in Pakistan). Beyond the Iraq example, the NSC did not examine readily available longitudinal or empirical studies to assess the validity of the theory and the likely amount of time required.⁹³⁹ Suggestions to review comparative examples were rebuffed.⁹⁴⁰ “History,”

⁹³⁴ Interviewees L, M, N, P, X; McChrystal (2013), 357; Gates (2014), 375, 379-380; Nasr (2013), 21-22

⁹³⁵ Gates (2014), 378-9

⁹³⁶ The *availability heuristic* is a tendency to inflate the importance of events that are more available in memory, which tends to favor more recent or emotionally charged events. Schwarz et al (1991), 195–202.

⁹³⁷ Interviewees L, M, N, P, and X. Nasr (2013), 25.

⁹³⁸ Interviewees L, M, N, P, and X; Gates (2014), 375, 382.

⁹³⁹ Interviewees L, M, N, P, X.

⁹⁴⁰ Interviewee M.

former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle A. Flournoy recalled, “never had a seat at the table.”⁹⁴¹

Surging into the Good War

President Obama’s updated approach showed the administration’s limited understanding of the strategic challenges and the president’s waning patience with the war. The new approach increased the scale of the effort, but failed to examine some problematic assumptions about the insurgency and the Afghan government that persisted since the Bush administration. The increased scale of the effort continued to be undermined by bureaucratic frictions and problems with the Karzai government. Assessments of progress made by each agency within its respective silo reinforced views that the war was on track, even as the situation continued deteriorating. Obama announced his decision in a speech at the United States Military Academy on 1 December 2009. Outlining the importance of success in the war, he reiterated the March 2009 aims of disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda and preventing the re-emergence of terrorist safe havens in either Afghanistan or Pakistan. The U.S. government aimed to achieve a secure, stable, sovereign Afghanistan that could defend itself and prevent the re-emergence of terrorist safe havens.⁹⁴² He approved a three-fold military, political, and diplomatic surge. He would commit an additional 30,000 U.S. forces, bringing the American total to nearly 100,000 troops. He requested an additional 7,000 from coalition partners. The surge forces would begin to withdraw by July 2011 and the transition to handing over security to the Afghans would begin. Not stated in the speech, the Administration had set December

⁹⁴¹ Interview with Michèle A. Flournoy.

⁹⁴² The White House, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan” (December 1, 2009).

2014 as the end of the combat mission and transition to full Afghan security responsibility.⁹⁴³ The larger ANSF was to be able to handle a residual insurgency that had been substantially degraded by the military.⁹⁴⁴ The President also directed a significant civilian increase to build Afghan government capacity.⁹⁴⁵ He directed diplomatic efforts to urge greater support from Pakistan and to assist in the reconciliation effort.

The result of the process was not a clear and coherent strategy, but a highly-detailed policy that gave direction to the interagency from which individual military, diplomatic, and developmental plans would be written and then executed in silos. Like in Iraq, there was no effort to develop with Afghan partners a coordinated strategy for the war or to address the misaligned aims and incentives.⁹⁴⁶ Despite Obama's concerns about reform, there was no conditionality tied to U.S. support and resources. The military campaign plan was purported to be a joint endeavor with the Afghan Army and Police, but was written by ISAF and translated into Dari.⁹⁴⁷ The capacity-building plans and programs often followed the same pattern. State was not directed to develop a governance strategy and had no requirement to explain how they would tackle the corruption problems.⁹⁴⁸ Capacity-building was assumed to lead to good governance. Despite approving a much-needed uplift in civilian support, the Obama Administration had enormous difficulty finding qualified people with the right expertise to

⁹⁴³ Karzai called for the same timeline in his 2009 inaugural speech (Rubin and Landler, 19 November 2009). This timeline was affirmed publicly in NATO's Lisbon Summit Declaration of 20 November 2010, paragraph 4.

⁹⁴⁴ Interviewees L and M.

⁹⁴⁵ Frances Z. Brown (2012). 3.

⁹⁴⁶ Interview with Douglas E. Lute; Interviewees M, N, and X.

⁹⁴⁷ Interviewees R, S, V, U.

⁹⁴⁸ Sarah Chayes (12 March 2013).

deploy. Major personnel shortfalls remained, and most of those who did deploy were billeted to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul rather than into the provinces and districts.⁹⁴⁹

State was likewise not required to develop a strategy for changing Pakistan's strategic calculus or for reconciliation.⁹⁵⁰ Holbrooke did arrange an important strategic dialogue that consisted of a series of meetings and an ambitious list of working groups, but dialogue and more economic and military support would not be sufficient to reorient Pakistan's national security assumptions and approaches. His staff wrote concept papers on reconciliation, but did not outline ways to integrate it into the Obama strategy.⁹⁵¹ For many in Holbrooke's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) office reconciliation was an alternative to the military campaign, not a complementary effort. Finally, no action was taken to improve civil-military integration. The starkly different views presented by McChrystal and Eikenberry, for instance, should have raised serious questions as to whether unity of effort was even possible unless one of them was placed in charge. Political, diplomatic, military, and intelligence efforts continued operating in bureaucratic silos directed from Washington. ISAF commanders and Ambassadors attempted to improve on-the-ground coordination, but these could not over-ride demands from the top.⁹⁵² The Obama Administration said that civilian and military efforts would be mutually reinforcing, but, as we saw in the Iraq case study, the reality was quite different. Afghans would continue exploiting the seams between bureaucratic silos. Frictions arose along the silos' fault lines. Uncoordinated civilian and military efforts self-synchronized in damaging ways – the most obvious case being the abortive June 2013 opening

⁹⁴⁹ Erickson et al (January 2016); *Council on Foreign Relations* (31 March 2010).

⁹⁵⁰ Interviewees H, J, L, M, and X. Chayes (12 March 2013)

⁹⁵¹ Nasr (2013), 45-46.

⁹⁵² Eikenberry, for instance, co-signed 2009 and 2011 versions of an "Integrated Civilian - Military Campaign Plan for Support to Afghanistan," which led to improved coordination in some areas. Major issues such as strategic priorities and managing trade-offs were beyond its remit.

of the Taliban political office, which will be discussed in Chapter 8. The whole remained less than the sum of its parts.

The new approach, however, was carefully calibrated to limit audience costs. Gates assessed that Obama was growing ambivalent and wanted to wind down the war as quickly as possible without creating a rift in the Administration.⁹⁵³ The president needed to show he was listening to the advice of his military commanders, while not giving them everything they wanted. He also wanted to send a signal to the Afghan government and to his base of support in the Democratic party that U.S. commitment was not open ended.⁹⁵⁴ He wanted Karzai to take ownership of the war and reform his deeply corrupt government. McChrystal and Eikenberry received more resources; the latter's dim view of Karzai's *bona fides* acknowledged. Obama's ambivalence, however, did not result in demands for more details about reconciliation or Pakistan. In short, a new President, who campaigned on Afghanistan as the real central front in the war on terror, felt compelled to give the military, the diplomats, his Vice President, and his political base enough of what they wanted to keep them on board. What suffered was the coherence needed for a strategy that could be dispassionately assessed and adapted.⁹⁵⁵

The speech also sent mixed messages on war termination which reflected conflicting views within the Administration. The announcement of both a surge and a withdrawal timeline in the same speech heightened the risk that the Taliban could simply play for time – a problem that could undercut U.S. leverage in a future reconciliation effort. Vali Nasr, one of Holbrooke's chief advisors believes that the White House was engaged in a concerted effort to block the

⁹⁵³ Gates (2014), 299.

⁹⁵⁴ Interviewee L.

⁹⁵⁵ For Gates' recollection of the process see Gates (2014), 370-385.

issue and to prevent Holbrooke from having any role in policy making.⁹⁵⁶ Holbrooke, however, had yet to coalesce his views into coherent form that could be discussed and debated. How reconciliation and counterinsurgency would integrate was never fully considered.⁹⁵⁷ Had reconciliation gone beyond the good-idea stage and been properly presented as a strategic option, the effects on reconciliation of announcing a withdrawal timeline would have come into question. Participants in the discussions recalled neither Holbrooke nor Clinton raising the concern.⁹⁵⁸

More Shovels in the Quicksand

Cognitive bias, bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems continued to impede American decision-making. These problems played a key role in Obama's stubborn resistance to alter the withdrawal timeliness and his unwillingness to examine the assumptions on which the transition strategy was based. Obama had lost patience with the war – he was looking to leave. Obama was not the only one ambivalent about the prospects of a decisive victory by the Afghan government or in a near-term reversal of Taliban fortunes. McChrystal knew he did not have the resources or authorities for an outright win. The military's mission was changed from “defeat” the Taliban to “degrade.”⁹⁵⁹ Even if the counterinsurgency campaign went well, without good governance and significant interdiction of Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, the war would drag on. His fears were realized during Operation Moshtarak, a major effort to seize and control the Taliban stronghold of Marjah and Taliban held areas in northern Nad-e Ali

⁹⁵⁶ Nasr (2013), 35-41.

⁹⁵⁷ Nasr (2013), 25, 28.

⁹⁵⁸ Interviewees L, M, N, P, and X; Gates (2014), 375, 382.

⁹⁵⁹ Gates (2014), 375, 382.

district in Helmand Province. This operation was to be followed months later by Operation Hamkari, an offensive into Taliban-held areas of Kandahar.⁹⁶⁰ The two operations, if successful, would take critical areas in the southern Pashtun heartland away from the Taliban. While the initial push into Marjah by a combined force of U.S. Marines and Afghan forces was successful in wresting control of the area, the hoped for “government in a box” (district level officials with economic resources at their disposal) that was to arrive and begin earning legitimacy was disappointing.⁹⁶¹ Abdul Rahman Jan, the former Helmand Chief of Police, was a predatory actor who reportedly controlled much of the Noorzai-tribe-dominated police in the province. He allegedly let the Taliban take control of Marjah in 2007 in retaliation for his removal as the Provincial Chief of Police. Retribution, residents feared, would be more likely than reconciliation and population security if he returned to the position.⁹⁶² Marjah, supposed to be a signature offensive in a new counterinsurgency campaign, soon became, in McChrystal’s words, “a bleeding ulcer.”⁹⁶³ By the spring of 2010, McChrystal, had come to believe that a negotiated outcome might hold the best prospects for durable success.⁹⁶⁴

The intellectual work for that conclusion began in the fall of 2009. McChrystal asked Retired British Lt. Gen. Sir Graeme Lamb, who engineered reconciliation efforts with Sunni tribes in Iraq, to come to Kabul and develop a reintegration program.⁹⁶⁵ Lamb and a small team of two U.S. and two U.K. officers talked extensively with Masoom Stanekzai, whom Karzai designated to lead the effort for the Afghan government, and a host of Afghan officials and

⁹⁶⁰ McChrystal (2013), 380-3.

⁹⁶¹ For a detailed discussion of the operation see Van Ess (30 September 2010).

⁹⁶² McChrystal (2013), 373-5.

⁹⁶³ Nissenbaum (24 May 2010).

⁹⁶⁴ Interview with General Stanley A. McChrystal, 23 January 2017; Interviewee E; personal recollections.

⁹⁶⁵ McChrystal (2013), 353-4. The small team included me, one other U.S. officer, and a couple of British officers.

elders from across the country.⁹⁶⁶ The team reviewed previous efforts, to include several localized initiatives that had been effective and the Afghan Government's Peace through Strength (PTS) program. Successful efforts tended to focus on dispute resolution and inclusive governance.⁹⁶⁷ PTS, however, was largely a scheme to bribe insurgents to defect. The program was marred by corruption.

Lamb and his team determined that good governance and dispute resolution were critical for reintegration. ISAF would need to support these efforts and develop ways to avoid targeting people engaged in substantive discussions. Local development projects that created jobs within affected communities could reinforce, but not substitute for, dispute resolution and improved local governance.⁹⁶⁸ Reintegration would probably hit a glass ceiling at local levels, they determined, due to the kleptocratic and predatory nature of the government and its resistance to reform. Even initial success could be quickly overturned by a new governor or chief of police. Furthermore, isolated efforts could be disrupted by the Taliban. Without significant support and efforts from the top-down, the bottom-up approach would have only limited impact. Reconciliation was critical for success.⁹⁶⁹

This problem was outlined to McChrystal, who asked Lamb to study reconciliation further and advise him on the results.⁹⁷⁰ The reintegration effort was handed to an implementation staff (the Force Reintegration Cell [FRIC]), while Lamb and the small team thought through the reconciliation issue and held meetings with diplomats, current and former Afghan officials,

⁹⁶⁶ Interviewee E.

⁹⁶⁷ Jones (2011), ix; Tapper (2012), 330-340.

⁹⁶⁸ See also Winterbotham (January 2012).

⁹⁶⁹ Interviewee E; Interviewees H and J held similar views.

⁹⁷⁰ Interviewee E.

and former Taliban senior leaders. A series of briefings built the case that the Taliban had sustainable support within Afghanistan and sanctuary in Pakistan that was unlikely to be interdicted. The predatory corruption within the Afghan government and security forces was so profound that it undermined any realistic prospect of an Afghan government political victory in the foreseeable future.⁹⁷¹

Opportunities existed, too. The Taliban's "Code of Conduct" and recent *Eid* messages had indicated that many Taliban public political positions were not dissimilar from public statements made by the Afghan government. There was a potential basis to for dialogue, but the competition for power would be the most difficult issue. An effort at a brokered deal would be problematic and potentially destabilizing – like the peace deals that fell apart in 1992 and 1993 and led to the Afghan civil war. A peace process, Lamb's team suggested, would need to be a deliberate effort, akin to the Northern Ireland process. Finally, the team noted the problem with the timeline. There was a major risk that the Taliban could simply wait out the United States. The best time to begin talks, therefore, was before all the surge forces arrived: take advantage of the uncertainty in the Taliban's mind and get the effort moving. If the Taliban withstood the surge and U.S. forces had begun to drawdown, American leverage would decline substantially. The Taliban could play for time. I briefed this issue to a Deputies Committee small-group meeting (a restricted meeting of cabinet-level deputies) in late January 2010, after having socialized it with Holbrooke's staff.

To be successful, reintegration (as outlined by Lamb) and reconciliation efforts had to work hand-in-glove.⁹⁷² Lower-level fighters leaving the ranks would put increasing pressure on the

⁹⁷¹ Interviewee E; personal recollection of discussions at ISAF at the time. See also Chayes (2016), 39-57.

⁹⁷² Holbrooke's successor, Marc Grossman, would helpfully describe reintegration as "retail" politics and reconciliation as "wholesale" politics. Grossman (December 2013), 31.

senior leadership, while senior level talks could induce local commanders to bide their time (nobody wants to be killed right before a cease-fire) and perhaps engage in local conflict resolution efforts. By late Spring of 2010, facilitated by their respective staffs, Holbrooke and McChrystal had largely agreed on this view.⁹⁷³ By March 2010 McChrystal believed the time was right to begin facilitating discussions between Karzai and Pakistani Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Kayani on reconciliation.⁹⁷⁴ McChrystal was keen to avoid stepping into Holbrooke's lane, but needed to help the effort gain traction.⁹⁷⁵ Such collaboration between the military command and SRAP ended abruptly when Obama accepted McChrystal's resignation in June 2010, the day after the aforementioned *Rolling Stone* article was published.⁹⁷⁶

Misapplying the Iraq Formula

Confirmation bias played an important role in keeping the Obama approach on auto-pilot. General David Petraeus, the CENTCOM Commander, was selected to replace McChrystal. Still recovering from prostate surgery and years of high-pressure assignments, Petraeus brought with him vast experience and a brilliant reputation from Iraq. Petraeus' view was that enough military pressure on the Taliban, plus a reintegration effort that could turn former insurgents into local police, could work in Afghanistan as it in Iraq. Petraeus tweaked his "Anaconda" concept from Iraq for application to Afghanistan, and brought in many members from the

⁹⁷³ Interviewees E, H and J; personal recollection of events at ISAF at the time. For a discussion of Holbrooke's views, see Nasr (2013), 56.

⁹⁷⁴ Interview with General Stanley A. McChrystal.

⁹⁷⁵ Holbrooke had poor relations with Karzai and Kayani, recalled Interviewees E, H, J. See also Gates (2014), 296; Neumann (May 2015), 6-7.

⁹⁷⁶ Hastings (22 June 2010); McChrystal (2013), 387-8.

MNF-I and CENTCOM teams to execute his plan.⁹⁷⁷ His reliance on the Iraq experience to guide his approach to Afghanistan has come under some criticism.⁹⁷⁸ A joke around the ISAF staff that summer was that every sentence began with the same two words: “In Iraq...” Petraeus recognized, though, that time was short and that he needed to produce unambiguous results if there was any hope of convincing Obama to delay the withdrawal timelines. His game-plan was consistent with the implicit theory of success from the NSC. He did not need people questioning the logic or second-guessing.⁹⁷⁹

There were good reasons, however, to doubt that the formula in Iraq could be replicated successfully in Afghanistan.⁹⁸⁰ The prevailing interpretation of the Iraq experience was that the surge in forces plus application of the new counterinsurgency doctrine and a reconciliation program convinced the Sunni tribes to turn against the deeply unpopular al Qaeda in Iraq.⁹⁸¹ Major reductions in violence were evident within a year.⁹⁸² The assumption was that a similar effort in Afghanistan should produce like results. No other cases, however, were used for comparison.⁹⁸³ Escalations of the war in Vietnam or the Soviet war in Afghanistan, for instance, failed to achieve success. The sharp downturn in violence in Iraq was more complicated than portrayed by the military at the time and relied on political and social factors that were not present in Afghanistan. It would also turn out to be temporary. Stephen Biddle examined the cause and effect relationships between the surge and the Awakening, and

⁹⁷⁷ Bolger (2014), 366-7; Hirsch and Tarabay (28 June 2011).

⁹⁷⁸ Bolger (2014) 366-7.

⁹⁷⁹ I returned in October 2010 to the Pentagon to continue work on reconciliation.

⁹⁸⁰ For skeptical views in the ISAF staff see Chandrasekaran (2012), 245-6.

⁹⁸¹ Baker (28 April 2009). See also the Iraq Case Study above, Chapter 4.

⁹⁸² See the discussion in Chapter 4.

⁹⁸³ Interviewees H, J, L, M, N, P, X.

cautioned against a formulaic belief that more troops plus the new doctrine would lead to success elsewhere.⁹⁸⁴

The conflict in Afghanistan, in fact, differed substantially from Iraq. The former was far more atomized and localized. Tribal cohesion had broken down during thirty years of war and efforts by the communists and the Taliban to replace tribal identity with political or religious conformity.⁹⁸⁵ Convincing a Pashtun tribal leader to switch sides and bring thousands of people with him would not work in Afghanistan, because hardly any tribal leaders commanded such a following. The Taliban, since 2009, were placing increased emphasis on governance and were using the full range of coercion and persuasion to gain control and support.⁹⁸⁶ Their political program was far more sophisticated than AQI's. The Taliban had a durable constituency in many rural areas of the south and east, and among Pashtun enclaves in the north and west. Unlike Iraq, the conflict did not break down into distinct ethnic and sectarian lines. Turning former insurgents into local police ran significant risk of creating new predatory actors in mixed communities, changing the make-up of local conflicts rather than resolving them.⁹⁸⁷

To add to the challenges, the Afghan government rather than the coalition (as was the case in Iraq) ran the reintegration program. The Afghan government had no intention of using the program as a forcing function for good governance and local dispute resolution. Reintegration councils largely consisted of cronies of the governor or local power-broker, oftentimes the same actors who drove people to fight the government in the first place. Soon the program

⁹⁸⁴ Biddle et al (2012), pp. 7–40.

⁹⁸⁵ Barfield (2010), p. 277, 285, 337, 339-342; Fick and Singh (4 October 2008); Kolenda (2010).

⁹⁸⁶ McChrystal, COMISAF, Initial Assessment, 2-6 to 2-8; Giustozzi (2009), 293-300; Taliban Code of Conduct (Layha), "Taliban 2009 Rules and Regulations Booklet Seized by Coalition Forces On 15 Jul 2009 IVO Sangin Valley"; Nijssen (September 2011).

⁹⁸⁷ International Crisis Group (4 June 2015); Human Rights Watch (12 September 2011).

reverted to the bribery schemes of the past.⁹⁸⁸ The program was absorbed by the kleptocracy, as government officials and reintegration councils extorted money and made phony reintegration reports. Curiously, the clear majority of “reintegreees” were Tajiks from the North and West, where the Taliban had no presence whatsoever.⁹⁸⁹ In some cases, local elites co-opted predatory militias to declare themselves to be Taliban so they could “reintegrate,” become an Afghan local police force, and be paid by the coalition.⁹⁹⁰ The predatory behavior never changed, but such militias now had official sanction. ISAF could demonstrate no correlation between reintegration numbers and lower levels of violence.⁹⁹¹ This information was collected by ISAF, but military officials continued citing the program as effective in taking Taliban fighters and leaders off the battlefield.⁹⁹² Such confirmation bias meant that no serious efforts were made to reform a program that ISAF viewed as central to success. As time would tell, there would be no Sons of Iraq equivalent in Afghanistan.

Assessing Progress, Managing Risks

The Administration’s new strategy required an annual assessment, which offered the opportunity to assess the strategic direction of the war and the likelihood of success. This

⁹⁸⁸ Derksen (22 September 2011).

⁹⁸⁹ Dersksen (7 March 2014) notes, “Of the 7,168 participants many are not genuine Taliban but criminals or members of self-defense groups. Few signed up from the south and the southeast, the heartlands of the insurgency.” See also *1230 Reports* (December 2012), 39-42, (July 2013), 37-43, and (November 2013), 25-30. The December 2012 report (p. 40) shows barely 6% of the reintegreees were from the Taliban heartlands in the south and southwest.

⁹⁹⁰ Derksen (22 September 2011); Not all Afghan Local Police (ALP) were raised in this manner. Most were developed in a coordinated effort between local coalition special operations forces and Afghan officials. Performance was uneven. Some ALP have improved local security. Others have undermined it.

⁹⁹¹ Briefings to me by ISAF officials in 2011 and 2012.

⁹⁹² See, for instance, *1230 Reports* (July 2013), 37-43, and (November 2013), 25-30.

process began in October and lasted into December 2010. Violence hit record highs that year. The Afghan security forces were growing in size and capability, but had serious leadership and corruption problems and were progressing more slowly towards being able to operate independently than forecasted. The Kabul Bank collapsed late that same year, after over \$900 million had been looted. Mahmoud Karzai, the Afghan President's brother, and Qaseem Fahim, the Vice President's son, were implicated.⁹⁹³ Afghanistan remained at the very top of the world's most corrupt governments.⁹⁹⁴ These problems led Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle A. Flournoy to conclude that the Afghan government was not winning the battle of legitimacy.⁹⁹⁵ Diplomatic efforts to induce Pakistan to "change its strategic calculus" and to turn on the Afghan Taliban, meanwhile, had yet to achieve any tangible results.⁹⁹⁶

Interagency battle lines were drawn quickly. The intelligence community assessed that the Taliban had strengthened; the military command countered that the increases in violence were due to ISAF taking the fight into more Taliban controlled areas.⁹⁹⁷ The Defense Department insisted the counterinsurgency campaign was on track and simply needed more time to work.⁹⁹⁸ After all, the surge forces had only been fully on the ground for a few months. Gates famously noted, "The sense of progress among those closest to the fight is palpable."⁹⁹⁹ Holbrooke, who died suddenly of a heart attack during the process, was convinced that COIN had already failed and wanted a major push on reconciliation. Members of the White House staff, skeptical of the

⁹⁹³ Partlow (30 June 2011); Graham-Harrison, (28 November 2010).

⁹⁹⁴ Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index," 2010

⁹⁹⁵ Interview with Michèle A. Flournoy.

⁹⁹⁶ Interview with General David H. Petraeus.

⁹⁹⁷ Bumiller (14 December 2010).

⁹⁹⁸ Nasr (2013), 26, 56-7

⁹⁹⁹ Parrish (16 December 2010).

surge in the first place, were convinced the military campaign was unlikely to produce results. Some reportedly pushed for a quicker drawdown.¹⁰⁰⁰ The Departments of Defense and State both accused the White House staff of being policy advocates rather than honest brokers and of placing the greatest weight on the most negative interpretation of events.¹⁰⁰¹

Confirmation bias was diluting the utility and objectivity in assessments. Individual agencies and the White House were making selective use of information to bolster their cases. The intelligence community assessments about the strength of the Taliban, endemic corruption in the Afghan government, and sanctuaries in Pakistan competed with optimistic assessments of progress from the field.¹⁰⁰² The conflicting assessments had plenty of facts on their side. What the NSC did not fully consider was that progress was being made in the field, but not nearly enough on the strategic factors that were placing success at highest risk. Interagency disagreement and an inability to develop and assess strategically relevant metrics reinforced a bias toward maintaining the status quo.

Overall, the contentious 2010 Afghanistan-Pakistan Annual Review (APAR) refined the war aims and specified five lines of effort: a civil-military campaign to degrade the Taliban and build Afghan capacity; strategic partnership; transition to full Afghan sovereignty (security, economic, political); regional diplomacy; and reconciliation.¹⁰⁰³ Reflecting the lack of interagency consensus and absence of discussion on war termination, the lines of effort were

¹⁰⁰⁰ Nasr (2013), 26-7.

¹⁰⁰¹ Gates (2014), 385; Interviewees H, M, and P, who were involved in the review; personal recollections as the Department of Defense lead strategist for the review.

¹⁰⁰² Bumiller (14 December 2010).

¹⁰⁰³ The White House, "Statement by the President on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Annual Review," 16 December 2010; *1230 Report* (December 2012), 11; The White House, "Overview of the Afghanistan and Pakistan Annual Review," 16 December 2010; U.S. Department of State, "Remarks by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Launch of the Asia Society's Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses," 18 February 2011.

co-equal and un-prioritized, but assumed to be mutually reinforcing toward a successful outcome. Unity of effort problems were not addressed. Each agency could continue optimizing efforts in their own lanes. Disagreements were largely addressed by watering down issues toward consensus.¹⁰⁰⁴ The problems of bureaucratic silos and efforts on one line of effort having negative effects on the others was not considered. Reconciliation became a major friction point, as we will discuss in Chapter 8.

The U.S. had a final opportunity at the end of 2011 to assess whether the transition strategy remained viable. This would be the last chance to alter course before the 2012 U.S. presidential elections and the major troop draw-downs in 2013. Administration officials and the military command in Kabul continued highlighting progress while noting that government corruption and insurgent safe havens in Pakistan were critical risks to success. At no point, however, did any senior official testify that these risks were insurmountable or that success required a significant course correction.¹⁰⁰⁵ The October 2011 semi-annual report from DoD to Congress, for instance, summarized the situation in optimistic terms:

[T]he International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and its Afghan partners have made important security gains, reversing violence trends in much of the country (except along the border with Pakistan), and beginning transition to Afghan security lead in seven areas Although security continues to improve, the insurgency's safe havens in Pakistan, as well as the limited capacity of the Afghan Government, remain the biggest risks to the process of turning security gains into a durable, stable Afghanistan.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Interviewees H, J, L, M, P, W, X.

¹⁰⁰⁵ See the Senate Armed Services Committee, testimonies by Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, "Hearing to Receive Testimony on the U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq," 22 September 2011.

The insurgency remains resilient, benefitting from safe havens inside Pakistan.... Nevertheless, sustained progress has provided increased security and stability for the Afghan population and enabled the beginning of transition in July of security responsibilities to Afghan forces in seven areas, comprising 25 percent of the Afghan population.¹⁰⁰⁶

The military believed its campaign plan would be successful in its specified tasks. The military component, although dwarfing other agencies in resources, comprised only a small part of the Administration's five lines of effort. For the first line of effort, the command was responsible for the military portion of the civil-military campaign to degrade the Taliban and build Afghan capacity (in this case, the ANSF). The governance and corruption problems, which belonged to State, were outside their authorities.¹⁰⁰⁷ For strategic partnership, the military played a supporting role to State in negotiations with the Afghan government. On transition, the military oversaw the security transition, but not the political and economic transitions. The military likewise played only supporting roles to State's lead on regional diplomacy and reconciliation. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Admiral Michael Mullen's congressional testimony in September 2011 captures the matter.

The military component of our strategy, to the extent it can be separated from the strategy as a whole, is meeting our objectives. Afghan and ISAF forces have rested the

¹⁰⁰⁶ *1230 Report* (October 2011), 1. See also subsequent reports through October 2014.

¹⁰⁰⁷ The military did make efforts to address corruption, but could only do so effectively in military contracting. General David Petraeus tasked BGen H.R. McMaster to lead Task Force *Shafafiyat* (Transparency), but the effort had no overall impact on the kleptocratic nature of the Afghan government or its the corrosive effects on the security forces.

initiative and the momentum from the Taliban in several key areas. The number of insurgent-initiated attacks has for several months been the same or lower than it was at the same time last year. And we are on a pace and even slightly ahead of our end strength goals for the Afghan national security forces.¹⁰⁰⁸

When asked directly by Senator Carl Levin, the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, if the effort was on course to meet the Obama timetable for the Afghan security forces to assume full security responsibility, Mullen replied, “As far as I can see, yes, sir... while the risk is up, I think it’s manageable and that there’s no question that we can get there and sustain the military success and the military component of the campaign.”¹⁰⁰⁹ In short, military officials stayed in their bureaucratic lane and testified about the military progress and risks.¹⁰¹⁰ What no one questioned was whether a successful military campaign could still result in strategic failure if the sustainability of the insurgency and government legitimacy problems were not sufficiently addressed.¹⁰¹¹ No one was responsible for addressing cross-cutting issues such as predatory corruption, Afghan political pressures that degraded ANSF readiness, and Pakistan sanctuary that were undermining the prospects of success. Because no echelon of command below the President was responsible and accountable for strategic success, this

¹⁰⁰⁸ Senate Armed Service Committee, testimony by Mullen, 22 September 2011.

¹⁰⁰⁹ U.S. Senate Armed Service Committee, testimony by Mullen, Mullen response to Senator Carl Levin, 22 September 2011. See also Petraeus (23 June 2011), p. 18.

¹⁰¹⁰ Mullen did note during his testimony the need for a reconciliation effort: “We must work toward a reconciliation process internal to Afghanistan that provides for redress of grievances and a state-to-state interaction between Afghanistan and Pakistan to resolve matters of mutual concern.”

¹⁰¹¹ Officials in the State Department were not given the same level of scrutiny by their Congressional committees or by the White House, so the risks to success were never fully examined.

problem was never properly identified or confronted. Efficacy of the transition-and-withdraw strategy was never examined by the NSC.

Despite important security gains, the insurgency remained sustainable. Violence levels in the second half of 2011 were indeed lower than the second half of 2010, but characterizing that as a trend would be misleading. 2011 showed a higher level of violence in the first half of the year [see Figure 4, below]. The 2010 parliamentary elections counted for much of the spike in attacks that summer, as the Taliban aimed to discredit the election and candidates used violence to suppress voting in areas where their opponents were popular. Violence in 2011 was three times higher than 2009. Although the military was tasked in 2009 to hand-over a residual insurgency to the ANSF by 2014, no standards were set to measure what residual meant or if insurgent strength in 2009 was the benchmark.¹⁰¹²

¹⁰¹² Interviewee M.

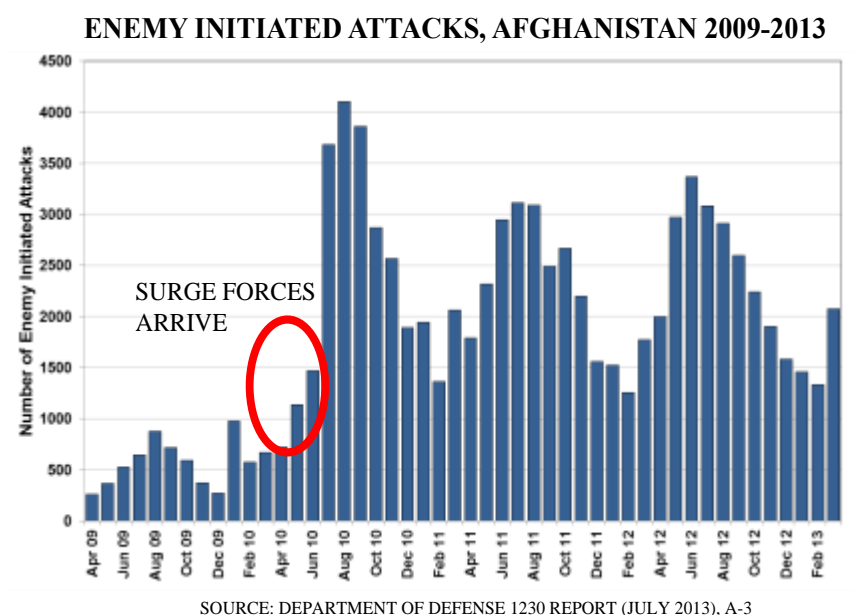


FIGURE 4 ENEMY INITIATED ATTACKS, AFGHANISTAN 2009-2013 ¹⁰¹³

The military offered no reason in its 2011 semi-annual reports to Congress, or in future reports or testimonies, to be overly concerned whether the insurgency would be sufficiently degraded to be handled by the ANSF at the end of 2014. “The ANSF are on track to assume full security responsibility by the end of 2014,” DoD assessed, “after successfully securing the presidential and provincial council elections and performing well during the fighting season.”¹⁰¹⁴ Although the ANDSF looked strong on paper, corruption and poor leadership were sapping their strength. Patron-client problems such as predation, sale of fuel, food, and equipment on the black market, ghost soldiers damaged readiness faster than capacity could be built. “How long would you stand and fight if your commander is stealing your food and equipment,” asked a former

¹⁰¹³ *1230 Report* (July 2013), A-3.

¹⁰¹⁴ *1230 Report* (October 2014) 8.

Afghan military officer.¹⁰¹⁵ The Afghan Local Police, despite some positive examples, were particularly corrupt and predatory.¹⁰¹⁶ The fielding of western systems and equipment, meanwhile, was increasing ANDSF dependency on western advisors. A June 2011 Senate Foreign Relations Committee report warned of Afghanistan's growing dependency and corruption.¹⁰¹⁷ In critical ways, ANDSF readiness to assume security responsibility was degrading even as their numbers and resources increased.

Adding to the problems, insurgent sanctuary in Pakistan remained intact. The efforts to build a strategic partnership with Pakistan that would change the latter's strategic calculus were ineffective. In May 2011, Obama approved the raid into Abbottabad, Pakistan, that killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Pakistan was outraged by the breach of sovereignty.¹⁰¹⁸ A month earlier a U.S. contractor had killed two Pakistani citizens in Islamabad, and was detained by Pakistani authorities despite American objections about diplomatic immunity.¹⁰¹⁹ A final blow came in a major border incident in which U.S. aircraft killed twenty-five Pakistan Frontier Corps soldiers who had fired on a nearby ISAF-ANSF patrol.¹⁰²⁰ At that point Pakistan cut the ISAF logistics line leading from Karachi to Afghanistan, forcing the coalition to move supplies through Russia and Central Asia instead. In his final testimony to the Senate Armed Service Committee, Admiral Michael Mullen, who worked diligently to build a productive relationship with Pakistan Chief of Army Staff General Kayani, decried Pakistan's use of insurgents as a

¹⁰¹⁵ Interviewee S.

¹⁰¹⁶ Goodhand and Hakimi (January 2014); International Crisis Group (June 4, 2015); Human Rights Watch (September 12, 2011); Faizy and Bengali (October 31, 2016).

¹⁰¹⁶ Faizy and Bengali (October 31, 2016); Mashal, Goldstein and Sukhanyar (May 24, 2015).

¹⁰¹⁷ Senate Foreign Relations Committee (8 June 2011); PBS NewsHour (8 June 2011).

¹⁰¹⁸ Schmidle (8 August 2011).

¹⁰¹⁹ Mazzetti (9 April 2013).

¹⁰²⁰ Masood and Schmitt (26 November 2011).

“veritable arm” of foreign policy.¹⁰²¹ A frustrated U.S. Senator Carl Levin, the Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, reported that he asked Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani why Pakistan had not condemned attacks on U.S. forces by groups operating from Pakistani soil, and that he had received no answer.¹⁰²²

Finally, the Afghan government was not showing any evidence of reform. According to Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index, Afghanistan was tied with Myanmar as the third most corrupt country in the world, behind North Korea and Somalia.¹⁰²³ Karzai resisted efforts to address corruption, faulting instead the United States for the problem.¹⁰²⁴ Mullen explained, “If we continue to draw down forces apace while such public and systemic corruption is left unchecked, I believe we risk leaving behind a government in which we cannot reasonably expect Afghans to have faith.”¹⁰²⁵ Some Defense officials pressed hard for the U.S. government to develop a credible anti-corruption strategy, particularly Mullen’s senior advisor Sarah Chayes, but State was unable to put one together and feared the risks of breaking the relationship with Karzai. The matter was dropped.¹⁰²⁶

The White House was unwilling to address these problems or examine their implications. Part of the issue was bandwidth. Senior officials complained that getting any time on the National Security Advisor or President’s agenda was a tremendous challenge.¹⁰²⁷ By 2011, although

¹⁰²¹ Bumiller and Perlez (22 September 2011).

¹⁰²² Senate Armed Service Committee, Opening Statement by Senator Carl Levin, “Hearing to Receive Testimony on the U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq,” 22 September 2011. See also Tankel (2016)

¹⁰²³ Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index,” 2011.

¹⁰²⁴ Alissa J. Rubin (11 December 2011).

¹⁰²⁵ Senate Armed Service Committee, testimony by Mullen, Mullen response to Senator Carl Levin, 22 September 2011.

¹⁰²⁶ Chayes (2015), 149-154.

¹⁰²⁷ Interviewees L, M, N, P, Q, W, X.

Deputies meetings were frequent, NSC meetings on Afghanistan were becoming rare.¹⁰²⁸ Major events such as the Arab Spring, Iraq withdrawal, bin Laden raid, Libya intervention, and major domestic challenges all competed for NSC attention. When the war in Afghanistan did come up, it generally involved crisis management.¹⁰²⁹ Little time or energy was available for considering highly complex issues.

The reconciliation effort, as we will discuss in the next chapter, was in disarray by the fall of 2011 and was by no means available to serve as a credible alternative approach. Believing that the “occupation narrative” was the driving force behind the Taliban’s ability to recruit, some senior White House and State officials clung to the argument that the drawdown would reduce the strength of the insurgency on its own.¹⁰³⁰ In this view, winding down the war would lower the threat of the Taliban. This would make the ANSF’s job of securing the country easier, and leave greater capacity to pursue higher domestic and international priorities. That Afghans had been fighting other Afghans from the Soviet withdrawal in 1988 to the Taliban overthrow in 2001 suggested the drawdown theory of peace was fanciful. In some ways, DoD’s assurances about the military campaign plan were also self-fulfilling for drawdown advocates in the White House. As long as the Administration believed that ANSF development was on track to secure the country by the end of 2014, there was no reason to take the political risks or suffer the political penalties of shifting priority to reconciliation, tackling corruption, or re-examining the withdrawal timeline. Confirmation bias, reinforced by measuring progress within bureaucratic silos, kept the withdrawal timeline off-limits to serious examination.

¹⁰²⁸ NSC meetings are chaired by the President. Principals meetings are chaired by either the Vice President or the National Security Advisor.

¹⁰²⁹ Interviewees L, M, W.

¹⁰³⁰ Pizzi (21 March 2014).

The Administration decided not to conduct a thorough review as it did at the end of 2010. Although DoD believed they could convince the President to “put more time on the clock” (to delay the draw-down), Obama held firm. He announced in June 2011 that the drawdown had begun and the combat mission would end in 2014, at which time the Afghans would be responsible for their own security.¹⁰³¹ The advocates of drawdown had won the argument, and there was no reason, from their standpoint, to open an interagency process that would invariably try to re-hash the issue.

In the event, the security situation declined as international forces handed over security responsibility to the ANSF in mid-2013.¹⁰³² Although the surge achieved temporary effects where international forces concentrated, the Afghan government proved incapable of winning the battle for legitimacy in contested areas.¹⁰³³ The United States was surprised by the extent of Taliban gains. The Afghan National Security Forces, ISAF asserted, was to be the “defeat mechanism” of the Taliban.¹⁰³⁴ Problems continued to materialize. Although rated by coalition advisors at the end of 2014 as capable of independent operations to secure the province, nearly the entire Helmand-based 215th Afghan Army Corps collapsed a year later and had to be reconstituted.¹⁰³⁵ The 215th was the newest Corps in the Afghan Army, but they were not covered by the post-2014 advisory mission. The British refused to take on the task, and the Obama administration declined to raise its troop presence to make up the difference. An Afghan military officer reported finding a Taliban warehouse of abandoned Corps equipment

¹⁰³¹ The White House, “Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” 22 June 2011.

¹⁰³² See *I230 Report*, October 2014; United Nations (9 December 2014).

¹⁰³³ Felbab-Brown (2013).

¹⁰³⁴ General John Allen, quoted in *The Economist* (4 February 2012).

¹⁰³⁵ Interviewees F, S, U, V; Jolly (9 February 2016).

during an operation in Marjah.¹⁰³⁶ By September 2015, the Taliban temporarily captured Kunduz, a provincial capital. This was the first major city they controlled since 2001.¹⁰³⁷ Al Qaeda presence began to grow in 2015 and an ISIS-affiliate established presence in the strategic border province of Nangarhar.¹⁰³⁸ In early 2017 over 30,000 suspected ghost soldiers were dropped from the rolls – nearly 10% of the ANDSF reported strength.¹⁰³⁹ Instead of fighting a residual Taliban insurgency, as U.S. policy forecasted in 2009, the ANSF were facing the strongest Taliban movement since 2001 and a growing terrorist presence.¹⁰⁴⁰ ISAF handed off not a residual insurgency, but one that had maintained or even grown strength, to an ANSF severely compromised by corruption, poor leadership, and political pressures.

Conclusion

Why did both governments fixate on ineffective strategies? *Confirmation bias* reinforced the Bush Administration's belief that the war was won, that a small military effort could defeat the remnants of the Taliban, and that the international community could pick up the burden of reconstruction. Progress within political, military, and economic silos was given far greater weight than evidence of mounting problems. For the Obama administration, the unfounded belief that the Taliban would be unwilling to fight other Afghans and frustration over the Karzai government's endemic corruption coupled with the Pentagon's narrative about the ANSF's readiness reinforced the logic of the withdrawal timeline. Even as evidence mounted that the

¹⁰³⁶ Interviewee S.

¹⁰³⁷ Goldstein and Mashal (September 28, 2015).

¹⁰³⁸ Kousary (5 October 2015).

¹⁰³⁹ Donati and Amiri (2017).

¹⁰⁴⁰ Roggio and Weiss (5 October 2015); Almukhtar & Yourish (19 April 2016)

Afghan government was losing legitimacy, the ANSF were plagued by corruption and poor leadership, and the Taliban remained resilient with their sanctuaries in Pakistan intact the drawdown timeline was not re-examined before the end of 2014. Civilian and military officials, despite expressing reservations about risks, focused attention within their bureaucratic silos. The United States' national security architecture discourages placing a civilian or military official in charge of the full-range of American political, diplomatic, military, intelligence and economic capabilities deployed to war zones like Afghanistan and Iraq. The result is that no one in the chain of command below President Obama had the authority and responsibility to focus on the big picture and to give a holistic appraisal of the situation and the probability of success. Each agency focused on progress within its own silo. The Obama administration thus hewed to a transition strategy that was unlikely to produce a successful outcome to the war, but would certainly result in a massive reduction of American troops in Afghanistan.

Chapter 6 outlined early bureaucratic frictions that delayed counterinsurgency and nation-building efforts, and allowed predatory actors at local and national levels to seize control of key centers of power and run roughshod over parts of the population. Elites continued to manipulate American forces and officials into advancing their personal and political agendas – sometimes by targeting their rivals. ISAF grew wise to this by 2010, but the strategic damage had been done. As both administrations operated in military, political, diplomatic, and economic silos, strategic risks were emerging along the seams and fault lines.¹⁰⁴¹ Each effort was making progress, but the whole was less than the sum of its parts. Military operations conducted with inadequate information or manipulated by elites had risk of undermining governance. Predatory corruption damaged government legitimacy and motivated people to

¹⁰⁴¹ As noted in Chapters 2 and 4, I will use the term “seam” to denote gaps between silos that can be exploited by host nation actors or adversaries. Fault lines describe problems in which progress in one silo undermines progress in others.

fight back. The inability of U.S. government agencies to agree about war termination, as will be explored in detail in the next chapter, left the Obama administration without a viable alternative. The tendency by both administrations to measure success within silos reinforced the narrative of progress and undermined their ability to understand and address the emerging strategic risks.

Severe *patron-client problems* emerged for both administrations that impeded strategic-decision making and coordination, masked the magnitude of challenges, and undermined capacity-building efforts. The U.S. and Afghan governments never developed a common strategy for the war. While the United States wanted to win quickly and leave, the new Afghan government focused on consolidating power and extending international presence and financial support. Karzai grew increasingly disillusioned with the United States, particularly during the Obama administration. As corruption grew as the glue holding powerful factions together under the Karzai administration, so did Obama's desire to withdraw. The Obama administration, however, failed to develop a way to address corruption and bad governance and had no program to apply conditionality. Both administrations, meanwhile, provided funding to the Pakistani military in the hopes of inducing them to shut down Taliban sanctuaries. They fought the Pakistani Taliban instead. This support to Pakistan increased Karzai's cynicism about American intentions, alarmed India, and reinforced Pakistan's incentives to support instability in Afghanistan while maintaining the flow of American cash. The U.S. approach "became a *de facto* military attrition campaign," Lute recalls, "the political and diplomatic efforts never materialized."¹⁰⁴²

¹⁰⁴² Interview with Douglas E. Lute. Lute was the Obama Administration's policy-lead for South Asia from 2009 to 2013.

These challenges also undermined the use of the transition method to achieve a favorable and durable outcome. By 2010, when the Afghanistan mission finally had significant resources and Washington's attention, the deck was stacked against a successful transition. The U.S. government did not understand the predatory kleptocracy or appreciate the strategic risks it entailed. No one was responsible or accountable for addressing the problem. State was unwilling to take on the task. Efforts by ISAF were too limited to have significant effect. When the matter finally reached the NSC, the Obama administration punted. Even the Kabul bank crisis was not enough to motivate an interagency policy or plan to address the problem. Meanwhile, the Afghan government and political elites had long since co-opted the ANSF leadership. With army and police positions controlled by power-brokers that were bought and sold at exorbitant prices, the primary motivator for too many leaders was feeding the kleptocracy.¹⁰⁴³ For them, fighting and winning the war was a lesser consideration. The selling and buying of offices, a cabinet-level Afghan official said, "is our biggest problem."¹⁰⁴⁴

The predatory behavior was creating more support for the Taliban. Sufficient support within Afghanistan combined with sanctuary in Pakistan kept the Taliban sustainable. Corruption and poor leadership in the government and security forces undermined the Afghan government's ability to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and Taliban controlled areas. Even conducted on the sizeable scale by the U.S. Embassy and the NATO Training Mission, the capacity-building efforts were badly diluted by perverse incentives. These problems were draining readiness and performance in the government and security forces at a high enough pace that capacity-building efforts never achieved the crossover point.

¹⁰⁴³ A former EUPOL senior official claimed that a Tier 1 chief of police position could cost between \$3million - \$5million

¹⁰⁴⁴ Interviewee AB. Interviewees AA, R, S, and Z expressed similar sentiments.

To be fair, the risk factors in Afghanistan were subtler than they were in Iraq. The Iraqi government's predatory sectarianism was easier to deduce and address than Afghanistan's emerging predatory kleptocracy. Pakistan was less obvious in their support for the Taliban (as was India for anti-Pakistan factions) than Iran was for Sadrist militias. Al Qaeda in Iraq, wanting to provoke a sectarian civil war, never had a governance strategy and could not care less about winning the battle of legitimacy. The Taliban did. While Iraq hurtled into disaster, Afghanistan crept incrementally but relentlessly toward failure.

Chapter 8: Ending the War in Afghanistan

President Obama's decision on 1 December 2009 to announce both a surge of forces and a timeline for withdrawal, limited American leverage during exploratory talks and undermined the potential to secure a favorable and durable outcome. The Taliban, thus, were interested in an arrangement with the United States but not a peace process to resolve the broader conflict. They aimed to use exploratory talks to gain concessions that improved their legitimacy while coaxing the United States to complete the withdrawal of its forces. They refused to negotiate with the Afghan government until foreign forces had left Afghanistan. American bargaining power declined as the drawdown continued. By March 2012 the Taliban believed they had little to gain by continuing the talks and little to lose by walking out of them.¹⁰⁴⁵ The reconciliation effort ended in disaster with the abortive attempt to open a Taliban political office in Doha on 18 June 2013.¹⁰⁴⁶ The fall-out from that event damaged U.S. legitimacy and contributed to an increasingly toxic environment in Afghanistan and the region.¹⁰⁴⁷

The United States and Taliban did manage to conclude a detainee exchange in June 2014, but this effort was de-linked from a peace process. Various exploratory conversations between Afghan officials and Taliban figures (outside the political commission) occurred in 2015, but stalled after the Taliban announced the death of their reclusive leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar.¹⁰⁴⁸ By mid-2016, a new four-party effort called the Quadrilateral Core Group had yet to produce meaningful results.¹⁰⁴⁹ As the security situation declined, President Obama ordered an

¹⁰⁴⁵ Nordlund, Bumiller, and Rosenberg (15 March 2012).

¹⁰⁴⁶ Rubin and Nordlund (19 June 2013).

¹⁰⁴⁷ Nordlund (24 November 2013).

¹⁰⁴⁸ Boone (7 July 2015); Shah and Stancati (30 July 2015).

¹⁰⁴⁹ Khousary (8 July 2016).

extension of U.S. military presence beyond 2016.¹⁰⁵⁰ “When we first sent our forces into Afghanistan 14 years ago,” Obama said as he announced the extension, “few Americans imagined we’d be there — in any capacity — this long.”¹⁰⁵¹ When the conflict will be “ripe” for negotiations remains uncertain.

A Fool’s Errand?

Why did reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan fail? Former Holbrooke senior advisor Vali Nasr argues that the White House was “too skittish to try it,” but he does not discuss what factors made Obama reluctant to put his eggs in the reconciliation basket.¹⁰⁵² Thomas Waldman, in a paper examining the intellectual history of reconciliation, suggests that the military was too closeminded.¹⁰⁵³ Afghanistan expert and former Pentagon senior advisor Sarah Chayes counters that this is too facile.¹⁰⁵⁴ As we will discuss below, the military was quite supportive of reconciliation but various parts of the military embraced different concepts of it. The same was true of the State Department, the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) office, and the White House. Dobbins and Malkasian contend that all U.S. government parties were to blame for “a failure to initiate a peace process at the peak of U.S. leverage, as NATO troops were retaking large swaths of the Taliban’s heartland in Kandahar, Helmand, and nearby provinces.”¹⁰⁵⁵ These arguments do not explore the reasons why the U.S. and

¹⁰⁵⁰ Rosenberg and Shear (15 October 2015); Ryan and DeYoung (6 July 2016).

¹⁰⁵¹ Landler (6 July 2016).

¹⁰⁵² Nasr (2013), p. 38; for a critique of Nasr’s views see Chayes (12 March 2013)

¹⁰⁵³ Waldman (2014), p. 1062.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Chayes (12 March 2013)

¹⁰⁵⁵ Dobbins & Malkasian (2015).

Afghan governments, the Taliban, Pakistan, and others ended up preferring to fight an inconclusive war rather than negotiate an end to it.

Bringing an insurgency to a negotiated conclusion has been historically difficult. Political Scientist James D. Fearon argued in 2007 that only 16% of the 55 civil wars fought since 1955 came to a negotiated end.¹⁰⁵⁶ Chris Paul and his co-authors at RAND find that only 19 of 71 wars against insurgencies since World War Two resulted in “mixed outcomes”, where neither side wins outright, but major concessions are made to end the conflict; in other words, a mere 27%.¹⁰⁵⁷ Fearon notes that, for the most part, the low rate of negotiated outcomes is not due to lack of effort. “Negotiations on power sharing are common in the midst of civil wars, as are failed attempts, often with the help of outside intervention by states or international institutions, to implement such agreements.” Such efforts usually fail, Fearon observes, due to mutually reinforcing fears: “combatants are afraid that the other side will use force to grab power and at the same time are tempted to use force to grab power themselves.”¹⁰⁵⁸ This problem creates a type of prisoner’s dilemma in which both parties might recognize the benefits of peace, but do not trust the other party enough to take the risk to stop fighting. An imposing peace-keeping force or third-party enforcer might make the sides abide by an agreement temporarily, but unless sufficient trust is built the power-sharing arrangement is likely to fall apart.¹⁰⁵⁹

Scholars and Afghanistan experts have been divided over reconciliation.¹⁰⁶⁰ Some academics, civil society advocates, and most Afghan elites associated with the former Northern Alliance

¹⁰⁵⁶ Fearon (March/April 2007).

¹⁰⁵⁷ Paul et al (2013), p. 16-21. The side which got the better end of the major concessions was declared the winner by the authors.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Fearon (March/April 2007)

¹⁰⁵⁹ Walter (1997), 335-364.

¹⁰⁶⁰ For a detailed overview of scholarship on reconciliation see Thomas Waldman (2014), 1049–1068

believed the Taliban to be irreconcilable.¹⁰⁶¹ They argued that any talks with the group would be akin to negotiating with terrorists, and inevitably result in trampling of human rights and legitimizing the use of terrorism as a political weapon. Non-Pashtun elites feared they would be sacrificed in any power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban; others likely foresaw a loss of economic spoils. Some scholars cautioned about the Taliban tendency to use negotiations as a stalling tactic.¹⁰⁶² A presumption of Taliban irreconcilability reflected the views of the Bush administration, particularly in the early years.¹⁰⁶³

From 2008 to 2011 an increasing chorus of experts and diplomats encouraged a political solution to the conflict. Most came to this conclusion due to the intractable nature of the conflict and the unlikely prospects of a clear military victory.¹⁰⁶⁴ British SRAP Sir Sherard Cowper Coles was a consistent advocate for reconciliation since at least 2009. His advocacy up to that point kept reconciliation in the conversation with the United States, but he had been unsuccessful in getting the Obama administration to make it an important priority.¹⁰⁶⁵ The Afghanistan Study Group argued in 2010 that “the US should fast-track a peace process designed to decentralize power within Afghanistan and encourage a power-sharing balance among the principal parties.”¹⁰⁶⁶ By 2009, senior U.S. commanders began to note that there

¹⁰⁶¹ Saikal (18 Oct. 2007); Maley (11 Nov. 2007); for an expert analysis of Northern Alliance views see Dam (August 2014).

¹⁰⁶² Semple (10 January 2013).

¹⁰⁶³ Dobbins & Malkasian (2015); Knowlton (7 December 2001); Rubin (4 June 2016).

¹⁰⁶⁴ See for instance, Rubin & Rashid (2008); Stanekzai (September 2008); Roberts (Feb.–March 2009); D’Souza (March 2009); Semple (September 2009); Matt Waldman (October 2010); Dorronsoro (2010); Steele (2011), 340; Afghanistan Study Group (2010); Brahimi and Pickering (2011); Waldman and Ruttig (2011); Cowper-Coles (2011).

¹⁰⁶⁵ Cowper-Coles (2011); personal recollections from the Obama review leading to the Reidel Report (February–March 2009) and discussions with UK officials during the McChrystal Assessment (June–August 2009).

¹⁰⁶⁶ Afghanistan Study Group (2010)

was no military solution to the conflict.¹⁰⁶⁷ Other experts viewed reconciliation as necessary for the end-game, but believed that the surge needed time to place more pressure on the Taliban.¹⁰⁶⁸ In this view, Taliban leaders would begin to opt-out of the insurgency and into the political and constitutional fabric of Afghanistan.

Those supporting a negotiated outcome had to contend with the fact that neither the Afghan government nor the Taliban were willing or able to enter peace talks. Powerful constituencies in both actors believed that they could – or must – win outright. For any reconciliation process to become sustainable, these internal groups needed to be brought along. With the conflict in Afghanistan raging for over 30 years by 2010, anxieties and animosities were intense. As a veteran of the Northern Ireland peace process said to me, “Ninety-percent of the negotiations are with your own base, not with your adversaries.”¹⁰⁶⁹ The Taliban, moreover, knew they could play for time. Obama’s announcement of a drawdown timeline meant that the Taliban simply needed to wait until July 2011 for the pressure to begin to ease.

Third-party actors complicated matters, creating an even broader prisoner’s dilemma problem.¹⁰⁷⁰ The Taliban capitulation and defection models required Pakistan to turn against the Afghan Taliban. A loss of sanctuary in Pakistan, plus intense military pressure in Afghanistan would have made the Taliban highly vulnerable to outright defeat.¹⁰⁷¹ The United States had proven unable thus far to motivate Pakistan to act against the Afghan Taliban.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty (30 August 2009); Baker (28 April 2009)

¹⁰⁶⁸ Frederick W. Kagan and Kimberly Kagan (17 March 2010); Chayes (12 March 2013)

¹⁰⁶⁹ Discussion with veteran of the Northern Ireland peace process, hosted by the British Foreign Commonwealth Office, 15 October 2014.

¹⁰⁷⁰ For systemic challenges with third party actors in derailing peace efforts, see Stanley and Sawyer (2009), 656-657

¹⁰⁷¹ For Taliban views on the importance of sanctuary see Farrell and Semple (December 2015–January 2016), 92.

Pakistan had no interest in forcing the Taliban to negotiate.¹⁰⁷² China might be able to compel a change in Pakistan's strategic calculus, but their wider regional interests far outweighed any support for Taliban capitulation.¹⁰⁷³ India was unlikely to support a power-sharing arrangement that might put their traditional Afghan allies out of power and draw Afghanistan into Pakistan's orbit.

A reconciliation effort in Afghanistan had to face these challenges. The conditions in early 2010 were not yet ripe for negotiations to end the conflict. To bring this about required the Taliban and Afghan government and their backers to believe that neither side was likely to win outright, that the benefit of future military gains was not worth the cost, and that a path toward a peace process was compelling enough to overcome the status quo.¹⁰⁷⁴ To bring about a peace process, the United States would have needed to modify its war termination strategy from transition-and-withdraw to a negotiated outcome. The Obama administration declined to do so, and thus had little bargaining leverage with the Afghan government, the Taliban, and Pakistan.

Reconciliation never gained sufficient traction because it could not pass the credibility bar with Obama's National Security Council (NSC). To do so, it needed to show clearly what conditions were necessary for key actors to decide that they could not win outright, how to bring about those conditions, and to outline an alternative path toward a peace process. These efforts had to be sufficiently compelling to overcome the status quo bias of the key actors, their fears of perfidy and loss, and significant audience costs. The absence of a conceptual apparatus for war termination within the U.S. government made these problems even harder, undermining communication and interagency cooperation. Obama's focus on transition-and-withdraw,

¹⁰⁷² Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016)

¹⁰⁷³ For a detailed discussion of regional challenges, see Rubin & Rashid (2008), p. 35-38.

¹⁰⁷⁴ For ripeness theory see Zartman (2001).

moreover, eroded American leverage and limited the incentives for a negotiated end to the conflict. A drawdown timeline, General Petraeus reflected, “tells the enemy that he just has to hang on for a certain period and then the pressure will be less. In a contest of wills, that matters.”¹⁰⁷⁵ Lack of vision and strategy, poor coordination, and sloppy execution reinforced these obstacles and friction points, dooming the effort to failure and Afghanistan to greater violence. Success might have been a long-shot, as two former SRAPs have argued.¹⁰⁷⁶ These problems made the odds far steeper than they needed to be. “The United States and Afghan governments,” Lute observes, “squandered their best opportunity to advance reconciliation.”¹⁰⁷⁷

Reconciling Reconciliation

Bureaucratic frictions and conflicting assessments undermined the ability of the Obama administration to pursue a coherent reconciliation effort before the draw-downs began to undermine American bargaining leverage. As mentioned in the last chapter, reconciliation became one of five un-prioritized strategic lines of effort in 2010, alongside the civil-military campaign, transition, strategic partnership, and regional diplomacy. The SRAP was responsible for regional diplomacy and reconciliation. Two factors boosted the importance of the latter. First, key advisors within State and Defense were successful in convincing the NSC during the 2010 Afghanistan-Pakistan Annual Review (APAR) that reconciliation was a logical adaptation of the 2009 strategy. With the Afghan government actively resisting reform and

¹⁰⁷⁵ Interview with General David H. Petraeus.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Grossman (2013); Dobbins & Malkasian (2015)

¹⁰⁷⁷ Interview with Douglas E. Lute. He argues that the best time to have advanced reconciliation was when 140,000 international troops were in country.

efforts to change Pakistan's political calculus not bearing fruit, they argued, the Obama administration should investigate the prospects of reconciliation. If done carefully, exploratory measures need not conflict with the other lines of effort.¹⁰⁷⁸

These arguments were reinforced by requests from the Taliban for direct but secret talks. Tayyab Agha, the chief of the Taliban political commission and former secretary to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, had asked Germany in 2009 to broker a meeting with the United States. After confirming his identity, the Germans arranged the first U.S. – Taliban meeting in Munich in November 2010.¹⁰⁷⁹ The discussion was general in nature but suggested that the Taliban were serious about talks. The result for the United States, as Secretary of State Clinton later explained, was the “fight and talk” approach – a dual-track effort that could lead toward a reconciliation process or, at worst, confirmation of Taliban duplicity.¹⁰⁸⁰

The 2010 Annual Review determined that “[o]ur civilian and military efforts ... must support a durable and favorable political resolution of the conflict. In 2011, we will intensify our regional diplomacy to enable a political process to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁸¹ Exactly what reconciliation was supposed to achieve, however, remained vague – reflecting a broader conceptual ambiguity within the U.S. government. Officially, reconciliation was defined as Afghan-led dialogue with Taliban senior leaders toward a political resolution of the conflict.¹⁰⁸² On the one hand, reconciliation could be viewed as *the*

¹⁰⁷⁸ Interviewees H and J; personal recollections as DoD lead for the 2010 APAR.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Rubin (4 June 2016); Ahmed Rashid (2012), p. 113-136.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Several U.S. officials were concerned that the Taliban might use talks for deception (*taqiyya*) to undermine the Afghan government and/or relieve military pressure until the US completed drawdown. See Ibrahim (Winter 2010).

¹⁰⁸¹ U.S. Department of State, “Remarks by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton” (18 February 2011).

¹⁰⁸² Force Reintegration Cell, HQ ISAF (March 2012), 4; United Nations Development Programme (I/2015), 1.

process leading toward the political resolution of the conflict. From this perspective, reconciliation should build toward a peace process that, while Afghan-led, would see an active American role. On the other hand, it could be interpreted as *an enabler* to a different process. From this perspective, the United States would convince the Taliban, whether by military or diplomatic means or a combination, to talk to the Afghan government. Once achieved, the United States would step back from the effort. The distinction is subtle, but the ambiguity would play an important role in the failure to achieve consensus on the effort.

To build momentum for reconciliation, Secretary Clinton discussed the political and diplomatic surges at a landmark speech to the Asia Society in February 2011. “Today,” she noted, “the escalating pressure of our military campaign is sharpening a ... decision for the Taliban.” The choices were to “break ties with al-Qaida, give up your arms, and abide by the Afghan constitution and you can rejoin Afghan society; refuse and you will continue to face the consequences of being tied to al-Qaida as an enemy of the international community.”¹⁰⁸³ Clinton had just outlined what became known as the three “red-lines” for reconciliation that were agreed with the Afghan government. Those who met the conditions could participate in the process. Those who refused would continue to be targeted. “This is the price for reaching a political resolution,” she announced. “If former militants are willing to meet these red lines, they would then be able to participate in the political life of the country under their constitution.” The speech was welcomed by many coalition partners who had come to the same conclusion about the need for a political resolution to the conflict.

This new ‘fight and talk’ approach was complicated because the Obama administration had not formally discussed or come to an agreement about how to best achieve a favorable and durable outcome. Exactly what reconciliation was designed to achieve and how it would integrate with

¹⁰⁸³ U.S. Department of State, “Remarks by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton” (18 February 2011)

other efforts was never properly settled. Petraeus, notes Vali Nasr, was skeptical of the reconciliation ideas envisioned by Holbrooke.¹⁰⁸⁴ When asked by the latter to discuss reconciliation, the general reportedly replied, “that’s a 15-second conversation. Eventually yes, but no. Not now.”¹⁰⁸⁵ Despite having only one year with surge forces in place (unless he could convince Obama to delay withdrawals) Petraeus believed such efforts to be premature. “It was clear from the outset – due to sanctuaries they enjoyed in Pakistan,” Petraeus recollected, “that we could not sufficiently pressure the leaders of the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network to get them to negotiate seriously.”¹⁰⁸⁶ The lack of war termination doctrine and clarity on reconciliation led to divergent views within the U.S. government. Petraeus’ view is consistent with capitulation and the three red-lines articulated by Clinton. Holbrooke envisioned discussions leading toward a compromise political settlement. Although the White House authorized the exploratory talks, but was unwilling to put any political capital behind the effort.¹⁰⁸⁷ The matter was also potentially compromised by how reconciliation was framed to the Taliban. They could surrender and trust the Afghan and U.S. governments to treat them fairly or they could keep being targeted. Unless the Taliban believed themselves to be on the verge of defeat, they would be unlikely to capitulate.

Within the Obama administration, at least four different ideas competed for traction. The status quo position, albeit implicit, was that the civil-military campaign to build Afghan capacity and degrade the Taliban, plus efforts to change Pakistan’s political calculus and shut-down insurgent sanctuaries, would make enough progress to allow the Afghan government and security forces to take over responsibility for security by 2014 and finish off a residual Taliban

¹⁰⁸⁴ Nasr (2013), 34-35

¹⁰⁸⁵ Chandrasekaran (2012), 247.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Interview with General David H. Petraeus.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Nasr (2013), 38-41; 56.

insurgency. The Afghan National Security Forces, ISAF claimed, would be the “defeat mechanism” of the Taliban.¹⁰⁸⁸ In this view, reconciliation would bring surrendering Taliban into the political fabric of Afghanistan. This was the concept implied in Clinton’s February 2011 speech and was supported by the Afghan government, the military command and Ambassador in Kabul, the Pentagon, and the White House. This approach was attractive because it required no substantive political compromise, limited audience costs, and, if achieved, could be viewed as a clear victory. This approach could have been successful in 2001. The downsides ten years later were its obvious conflicts with reality. The Taliban were under significant pressure, but nowhere near the point of contemplating surrender. American officials involved in reconciliation had to deal with the incongruity in one of two ways: either change the strategy or simply do what you could within an unrealistic construct.

Some members of the SRAP team addressed the incongruity by arguing that reconciliation should aim for a peace deal or “grand bargain” with the Taliban.¹⁰⁸⁹ Vali Nasr argues that this was largely the view of Holbrooke and some of his key advisors.¹⁰⁹⁰ “COIN has failed,” a senior SRAP official told me in 2011, now it was the diplomats turn to take over.¹⁰⁹¹ The grand bargain offered the potential for a near-term end to the conflict. There were major downsides, however. First, peace deals in low trust environments can be destabilizing.¹⁰⁹² Recent Afghan experiences with peace deals were not positive ones. As noted in Chapter 6, the Peshawar (1992) and Islamabad (1993) Accords led to and perpetuated the Afghan civil war. Second, there seemed little appetite within the Afghan government or polity for such a deal. To many

¹⁰⁸⁸ General John Allen, quoted in *The Economist* (4 February 2012).

¹⁰⁸⁹ Rubin & Rashid (2008)

¹⁰⁹⁰ Nasr (2013), 35-6

¹⁰⁹¹ Personal conversation with a senior SRAP official, March 2011. See also Nasr (2013), 26-27.

¹⁰⁹² Walter (1997), 335-364; Fearon (March/April 2007)

Afghans, particularly the former Northern Alliance factions in government and civil society groups in Kabul, a peace deal with the Taliban was anathema. Senior SRAP Advisor Rina Amiri voiced concerns about the potential for backlash and the need to carefully gain Afghan buy-in.¹⁰⁹³ Senior State and Defense officials, myself included, voiced these same concerns.

Marc Grossman, a highly accomplished and respected career ambassador, was in a difficult position as Holbrooke's replacement. He likely recognized the unlikelihood of large-scale Taliban defections assumed in the status quo and the downsides of the grand bargain. He consequently developed, over time, a less ambitious and potentially more achievable approach of using confidence-building measures and regional diplomacy to get the Taliban to agree to meet with the Afghan government. "To try to open the door for Afghans to talk to other Afghans about the future of Afghanistan," as he described.¹⁰⁹⁴

The upside to this approach was its limited and potentially attainable goal. It focused on playing a declining hand well rather than seeking to improve the hand or change the game. The United States was losing negotiating leverage, but it might still have enough carrots to get a Taliban agreement to begin official talks with the Afghan government. Such a step would imply Taliban recognition of the Karzai government as a legitimate negotiating partner – a substantial achievement. This approach limited the need for interagency coordination and conformed closely to the traditional envoy-to-envoy discussions diplomats spend their careers doing. It also removed the United States from negotiating peace.

The downsides included the potential backlash in the United States and Afghanistan of talks with and concessions toward the Taliban – which constituencies in both countries regarded as a terrorist group. Talks with the United States would confer more political legitimacy on the

¹⁰⁹³ Nasr (2013), 41.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Grossman (December 2013)

Taliban than they had had to date. There was also the potential for the United States to make key concessions to the Taliban in exchange for a single meeting that the latter could easily orchestrate into a propaganda coup. This approach would not bring an end to the conflict nor set the conditions for negotiations that gave maximum advantage to the Afghan government and protection for U.S. interests. Unless sufficiently coordinated, it might also be viewed suspiciously by the Afghan government. At best, this process would set a precedent for discussions, which would realistically occur only after international forces completed the drawdown. At that point, the Afghan government would be in a relatively weaker position than it was from 2011 to 2014. In short, the approach might accomplish the narrow objective of arranging a meeting, but arguably little to support U.S. strategic goals.

My personal view, as the Defense Department lead for the effort, together with some senior advisors at State, was that reconciliation should be a deliberate and incremental peace process (rather than peace deal) that was closely coordinated with the Afghan government. I based this view on a significant amount of personal research at the time on war termination.¹⁰⁹⁵ The prospects for a favorable and durable outcome that met U.S. interests, we felt, were more likely to be achieved by this approach than the other three. Reconciliation should take a strategic rather than tactical approach – and be the priority among the five lines of effort.

We argued that given the strategic situation, a deliberate peace process held the best opportunity for the United States to achieve the most favorable and durable outcome realistic at the least possible costs. Rather than continue with a strict drawdown timeline, the Administration should stabilize the troop presence indefinitely to convince the Taliban it would not win through force of arms. Ideally, exploratory talks should begin before the surge forces

¹⁰⁹⁵ Such works included Rose (2010); Iklè (1991); Reiter (2009); Caplan (2012); Lee & Walling (2003); Stanley (2009a); Stanley (2009b); Zartman (2001).

arrived to take advantage of the uncertainty within the Taliban about how much damage the military effort would do to them. If the Taliban withstood the surge and the United States began drawing down forces, we argued, the Taliban could simply play for time. They might negotiate our withdrawal, as the North Vietnamese did during the Vietnam War, but not an end to the conflict. A stalemate in which the Afghan government controlled 90% of the country to the Taliban's 10% would certainly put the Afghan government in a position of significant strength for negotiations.

A compelling vision and strategy was needed to bring about a peace process. A step-by-step approach that built trust and confidence, we reasoned, could lead within a few years to growing consensus on key political principles and measures to reduce violence, and eventually to cease-fires and discussions on more sensitive political issues. This process could also test Taliban intentions at relatively low risk, while assessing the veracity of their statements and credibility of their commitments. The national-level process needed to be complemented by local reintegration efforts that focused on good governance and conflict resolution, and a regional dimension to address inter-state issues. This approach was more likely than the alternatives to result in a successful resolution to the conflict, but would probably take years to come to fruition. Afghanistan had been at war by then for over 30 years. A durable peace would not break out after a few meetings. The other lines of effort would need to align their efforts accordingly.

This approach had its downsides, too. It would require Obama to modify the withdrawal timelines and suffer potential audience costs.¹⁰⁹⁶ Talks with the Taliban were politically risky in the United States and Afghanistan. The Administration would also incur the fiscal risk to

¹⁰⁹⁶ These were likely less than imagined. When Obama announced delays to the drawdown timeline after 2014, American public opinion did not register any political costs to Obama (in fact, those surveyed were less inclined to see the war as a mistake). See Dugan (12 June 2015).

higher domestic and international priorities of having large numbers of troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014, if the negotiations had not progressed by then to entail troop reductions. This approach required strategic patience and a long-term view, both often in short supply in Kabul and Washington. In short, it was very difficult politically, but preferable, we thought, to losing or to post-2014 negotiations in which the Taliban had much greater leverage. State and Defense coordinated closely on a paper along these lines just before Grossman took over at SRAP. This proposed approach was approved by NSC Deputies, but was never moved forward for approval by Principals or disseminated to the field for implementation.¹⁰⁹⁷ Some State and Defense officials close to the effort suggested that the concept was much more ambitious than Grossman was comfortable attempting.¹⁰⁹⁸

SRAP moved forward with the more limited approach. DoD agreed that a serious reconciliation effort needed to employ in concert several elements of national power.¹⁰⁹⁹ With 100,000 troops on the ground, the Pentagon believed their military capabilities could be of significant help. They were also concerned about the security and force protection implications if uncoordinated agreements were made during talks. Conversely, military operations conducted in isolation could have very damaging effects on reconciliation. Talks could easily be derailed, for instance, if an interlocutor was killed or captured. Spoiler activity needed to be understood and managed.¹¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the military had several “tribes” of its own that needed to support the effort. In addition to the military and civilian officials at the Pentagon, the four-star commands at ISAF, US Central Command, US Special Operations Command, and NATO all had equities.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Nasr (2013, p. 38) notes that it was given a slow-death in the interagency process.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Interviewees H, J, L, and M.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Grossman (December 2013), 30.

¹¹⁰⁰ For discussions of spoiler groups in peace negotiations, see Nimrod Goren and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds. *Spoilers of Peace and the Dilemmas of Conflict Resolution*, November 2012; Edward Newman and Oliver Richmond, *The Impact of Spoilers on Peace Processes and Peacebuilding*, United Nations University, 2006

Two ISAF commanders told me that they wanted to support the effort but needed to know what to do.¹¹⁰¹ The military wanted to help, but needed to be brought along.¹¹⁰²

SRAP's resistance to a reconciliation strategy might seem odd, while the Pentagon's insistence on having one might appear to others as a terrible encroachment. Because of their effects on reconciliation, it is worth explaining the different institutional views on strategy between the US military and diplomats. Borrowing from management theory, the military tends to favor deliberate strategy, while diplomats tend to embrace emergent strategy.¹¹⁰³ The Pentagon is very good at the former. Any serious issue undergoes a rigorous planning effort that is vitally important for the coordinated activity of thousands of people, the organization of massive amounts of logistics, and the integrated application of lethal force and capabilities. Deliberate strategy, however, can over-engineer problems and limit flexibility. State's institutional culture views planning as a waste of time. As explained to me by former State Department officials, when a diplomat wants to slow-roll something into non-existence one of the first acts is to call for a plan.¹¹⁰⁴ American diplomats tend to be more comfortable with emergent strategy – skillfully playing the hand you are dealt while adapting to a dynamic situation and the efforts cooperative or adversarial partners, all to protect or advance U.S. interests. Holbrooke appropriately likened diplomacy to jazz.¹¹⁰⁵ This approach, however, limits interagency coordination and integration, and can come across as simply making it up as you go along. If the players do not understand music, noise results. The risk may be low if the diplomatic effort

¹¹⁰¹ Confidential conversations with two ISAF commanders.

¹¹⁰² Interviewees H, J, M, W. Grossman argues that he consulted closely with Defense officials about reconciliation, Grossman (December 2013), 30-1.

¹¹⁰³ See, for instance, Mintzberg and Waters (1985), 257–272.

¹¹⁰⁴ Interviewees H and M.

¹¹⁰⁵ Nasr (2013), 49.

is operating on its own, but increases significantly when other stakeholders and American lives are involved. Those who do not think ahead and set conditions for success can be outmaneuvered by others who do.

Reconciliation, under any of the concepts except perhaps Grossman's very limited method, needed an appropriate blend of both deliberate and emergent strategies. The United States never properly articulated its reconciliation strategy, which frustrated Defense and some in SRAP and probably made Grossman feel second-guessed and micromanaged. "There were occasions," Grossman reflected, "when some colleagues tried to micromanage the conversation with the Taliban in ways designed to make it impossible to continue, but the need to keep inter-agency representatives engaged and as supportive as possible overrode my periodic frustrations."¹¹⁰⁶ To be sure, ideas on reconciliation from Defense could be as unwelcome to some diplomats as State recommendations on military efforts would be to some generals.

The result was the lack of an agreed concept within State, within the U.S. government, and between the American and Afghan governments. Various stakeholders were pulling in different directions and potentially sending mixed messages to other parties. "Bureaucratic silos and turf battles undermined coordination on reconciliation," reflected former Deputy SRAP Vikram Singh.¹¹⁰⁷

Competing Visions: Karzai, Taliban, Pakistan

Patron-client challenges further undermined the prospects of bringing the war into a peace process. Other key stakeholders, of course, had their own views and interests which would

¹¹⁰⁶ Grossman (2013), p. 23.

¹¹⁰⁷ Interview with Vikram Singh.

need to be addressed for reconciliation to gain sufficient traction. At the risk of oversimplification, I will focus on the Afghan government, the Taliban, and Pakistan, recognizing that they are not unitary actors (or the only actors) but that their positions had to address views from an array of internal and external stakeholders. Their policies, in many ways, were designed to account for these varied inputs, pressures, and constraints.

Karzai had an altogether different view on reconciliation, beyond agreement on the three red-lines (renounce violence, accept the Afghan Constitution, and cut ties with al Qaeda). In some ways, Karzai could not accept the fact that Afghans were fighting against his government. He believed that local fighting was the result of America bringing the war to Afghan (mainly Pashtun) villages and the associated backlash over civilian casualties and questionable detentions.¹¹⁰⁸ The Taliban leadership, he believed, was wholly a creature of Pakistan. With enough money and American pressure on Pakistan, he argued that he could bring about the defection of Taliban senior leaders and bring them into his orbit.¹¹⁰⁹ To increase pressure on Pakistan, the Afghan government had also begun clandestine support of the Pakistani Taliban.¹¹¹⁰ Karzai was not interested in formal talks between his government and the insurgency, which he believed gave the latter political legitimacy they did not deserve. He rejected participation in reconciliation conferences in which his government would be treated as one of many “Afghan parties” along with the Taliban, political opposition figures, and civil society groups.¹¹¹¹ The US intelligence community did not believe the Karzai approach was realistic given the political cohesion of the Taliban, the weakening ties between the Pakistani

¹¹⁰⁸ Faiez and Dozier (10 March 2013); *The Washington Post*, “Hamid Karzai says U.S.-Afghan relationship ‘has been at a low point for a long time’,” 2 March 2014.

¹¹⁰⁹ Rubin (4 June 2016)

¹¹¹⁰ Londoño and Seiff (10 October 2013); Rosenberg (28 October 2013).

¹¹¹¹ Shah and Faiez (29 January 2013); Alissa J. Rubin and Walsh (16 February 2013).

government and Taliban, and the near impossibility of eradicating Taliban sanctuaries alongside densely populated Afghan refugee camps and city sectors that had existed for over thirty-years.¹¹¹² By 2014 only one estranged former Taliban senior leader, Agha Jan Mutasim, had defected after he was shot and left for dead by his erstwhile compatriots.¹¹¹³

Karzai's approach reflected the limited political space in Afghanistan for reconciliation. Elites from the former Northern Alliance, warlords, and civil society actors were adamantly opposed to negotiations with the Taliban.¹¹¹⁴ Such talks might re-open the issue of accountability for war crimes during the Afghan civil war; anti-Taliban warlords had orchestrated an amnesty bill in 2007 that forgave them of such crimes.¹¹¹⁵ They also feared that a deal with the Taliban would come at political and economic cost to them. Civil society actors highlighted the potential for backsliding on human rights. A peace deal or process would likely result in discussions about political reform or changes to the constitution. The co-opt and defect model would not. India, meanwhile, was not keen on any reconciliation effort that diminished the influence of their supporters or increased Pakistani influence in Afghanistan.¹¹¹⁶

To build support for his approach, Karzai held a Consultative Peace Jirga in June 2010. The *jirga* appointed a High Peace Council under the leadership of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani.¹¹¹⁷ Rabbani was the head of the Badakhshan-based *Jamiat-e Islami Afghanistan* party during the Soviet war and had served as the President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan from

¹¹¹² Interviewees F, H, L, M, W.

¹¹¹³ Roggio (22 February 2014); Borger (20 September 2014).

¹¹¹⁴ Dam (2014)

¹¹¹⁵ Amnesty International (2014), 5-6; Kouvo (22 February 2010).

¹¹¹⁶ Rubin & Rashid (2008)

¹¹¹⁷ Gall (4 June 2010); Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, "The Resolution Adopted at the Conclusion of the National Consultative Peace Jirga," June 2- 4, 2010, Loya Jirga Tent, Kabul.

1992 to 1996 when his government was ousted by the Taliban. The High Peace Council (HPC) led by the fiercely anti-Taliban Rabbani could provide Karzai with the political cover he needed. As Indo-Afghan ties strengthened due to Pakistan's malign activity, so did Karzai's caution on reconciliation.

The view from the Taliban was quite different. Although many U.S. and international officials regarded Secretary Clinton's February 2011 speech as a breakthrough towards peace, the Taliban viewed the red-lines as unacceptable pre-conditions.¹¹¹⁸ To lay down arms and cut ties with their allies, even ones as problematic to them as al Qaeda, before entering talks was tantamount to surrender. Moreover, to forfeit so much leverage before negotiations would be foolish, and potentially suicidal. The Taliban were under substantial military pressure, to be sure, but their sanctuaries remained intact and they had no trouble recruiting in Afghanistan or funding the insurgency.¹¹¹⁹ They were certainly not on the brink of surrender or defeat, and many senior leaders remained confident in their prospects for eventual success. In addition, to accept the Constitution meant accepting the legitimacy of the Bonn process, from which they were excluded, and to accept the provision in the *preamble* that resistance to the Taliban was on par with resistance to the Soviets.¹¹²⁰ Some current and former Taliban senior leaders

¹¹¹⁸ Interviewees F, G, H, I, J, and Y; personal conversations with former and then-current senior Taliban officials, 2011-2013. Clinton later explained them as "end-conditions."

¹¹¹⁹ For Taliban views on the intensity of the military pressure see Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016), 82-3.

¹¹²⁰ Interview with Barnett R. Rubin. The preamble notes, "Appreciating the sacrifices, historical struggles, jihad and just resistance of all the peoples of Afghanistan, admiring the supreme position of the martyrs of the country's freedom," According to Taliban experts and former Taliban officials, the jihad refers to the Soviet war and "just resistance" signifies opposition to the Taliban rule. For additional Taliban views on the Afghan constitution see also Semple et al (September 2012), 4.

considered the provision hypocritical, noting to me that Afghan officials and warlords do not themselves abide by the Constitution.¹¹²¹

The Taliban developed their own dual-track approach.¹¹²² They were keenly interested in discussions with the United States, but not in negotiations to end the conflict. Their approach to talks was not cynical; it reflected strategic calculation.¹¹²³ They would continue the military campaign, but use diplomacy to build legitimacy in the eyes of Afghans and the international community.¹¹²⁴ If the Taliban overthrew the government, they would need international assistance to survive.¹¹²⁵ As Tayyab Agha explained to me in September 2010, “We were the government once, but we were isolated from the international community.... When we return to government, we need to have good relations with the world, especially the United States.”¹¹²⁶ If the Taliban could not win outright and the war came to a stalemate, their leverage in negotiations would be far higher after international forces left. The gradual drawdown of international forces served to increase the Taliban bargaining leverage over time, while reducing that of the United States.

The Taliban had audience costs to consider, too. They had to build support carefully within their diverse and highly decentralized movement, just like the United States and Afghan government would have to bring along their constituencies. After vilifying the Karzai government as puppets and the international forces as infidel occupiers, a sudden move toward

¹¹²¹ Personal conversations with former and then-current senior Taliban officials, 2011-2013.

¹¹²² Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Statement of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan regarding negotiations”, 3 January 2012. See also Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016), 97-8.

¹¹²³ Bin Laden’s Bookshelf, “Letter from Mohammad Tayib,”, released 1 March 2016.

¹¹²⁴ Interviewees F, G, I, M, S; Rosenberg and Rubin (18 June 2013).

¹¹²⁵ Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016), p. 101; Semple et al (2012).

¹¹²⁶ Personal discussion with Tayyab Agha in Doha, September 2011.

peace negotiations risked splintering the insurgency.¹¹²⁷ The dual-track approach afforded the opportunity to sustain the military campaign, while building international credibility that would be needed if the Taliban returned to power.¹¹²⁸

Confirmation bias and political frictions undermined the U.S. government's ability to exploit key differences between the Taliban and al Qaeda. Many senior U.S. officials and Members of Congress viewed the Taliban and al Qaeda as largely one in the same, and wanted no negotiations with terrorists.¹¹²⁹ Of course, such a view was overly simplistic. In fact, the relations between the Taliban and al Qaeda were always rocky and had atrophied over time.¹¹³⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, bin Laden was invited to Afghanistan in 1996 by Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf with Rabbani's permission. Tayyab Agha commented several times during the talks that the Taliban had "inherited al Qaeda." They accepted their support and provided them sanctuary, too. Nonetheless, it is interesting to examine some of the documents from the bin Laden raid that have been released recently by the Department of National Intelligence. In one, al Qaeda senior leader Abu Yahya felt compelled to issue a guidance letter about proper behavior to presumably Gulf Wahabbis wanting to join the fight in Afghanistan among Deobandis.¹¹³¹ In a letter to bin Laden an al Qaeda operative describes their support as only moral and symbolic, "We are participating in the work in Afghanistan, and we have to do that,

¹¹²⁷ Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016), p. 97-9.

¹¹²⁸ Interviewees F, G, I.

¹¹²⁹ National Security Presidential Directive 12 (NSPD-12), "United States Citizens Taken Hostage Abroad," was signed by President Bush on 18 February 2002, forbidding the US from negotiating with terrorists. This was later modified by President Obama on 24 June 2015 with Presidential Policy Directive 30 (PPD-30), "Hostage Recovery Activities."

¹¹³⁰ For a detailed discussion of the Taliban's relationship with al Qaeda, see van Linschoten & Kuehn (2012).

¹¹³¹ *Bin Laden's Bookshelf* (released 1 March 2016), "Recommendations for the Mujahideen Entering Afghanistan." Deobandis are Hanafi Muslims. Hanafi is one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence. They view the writings of scholar Abu Hanifa as authoritative. Wahabbis do not.

but praise be to God, Taliban almost does not need us.”¹¹³² After bin Laden questioned Mullah Omar on the wisdom of talking with the international community, Tayyab Agha issued a strongly worded reply explaining the Taliban’s rationale on religious and practical grounds and rejecting bin Laden’s description of talks as appeasement.¹¹³³ The Taliban also seem to have asked bin Laden not to return to Afghanistan or to appoint an al Qaeda representative for Afghanistan.¹¹³⁴ The Taliban, in short, could potentially offer the US what it wanted most (cutting ties with al Qaeda) in exchange for what the Taliban wanted most – withdrawal of international forces so the insurgency could fight an unaided Afghan government.¹¹³⁵

To support their diplomatic efforts, the Taliban revamped their strategic communications and political program. Prior to 2008, their *Eid al-Fitr* and *Eid al-Adha* statements attributed to Mullah Omar were pedantic vitriol. Beginning in 2009, these statements became far more sophisticated and clearly aimed at both Afghan and international audiences. The new narratives repeatedly noted the strictly national aspirations of the Taliban and that they posed no threat to other countries. The September 2009 *Eid al-Fitr* message explained:

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan wants to maintain good and positive relations with all neighbors based on mutual respect and open a new chapter of good neighborliness of mutual cooperation and economic development.

We consider the whole region as a common home against colonialism and want to play our role in peace and stability of the region. We assure all countries that the Islamic

¹¹³² *Bin Laden’s Bookshelf* (released 20 May 2015), “Summary on Situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

¹¹³³ *Bin Laden’s Bookshelf* (released 1 March 2016). “Letter from Mohammad Tayib,”

¹¹³⁴ *Bin Laden’s Bookshelf* (released 20 May 2015), “Updated letter RE: Afghanistan.”

¹¹³⁵ See also Semple et al (2012), 3, 5-7. Verification, of course, would be a major challenge, as would prevention of cheating. For a good discussion of the challenges, see Waldman (2010).

Emirate of Afghanistan, as a responsible force, will not extend its hand to cause jeopardy to others as it itself does not allow others to jeopardize us.¹¹³⁶

The last line was carefully crafted to show the Taliban's distance from international terrorism. Although the nuance was largely lost on western governments, the statement caused a stir within the larger jihadi community.¹¹³⁷ Despite the controversy, the Taliban doubled down on the sentiment in a 14 October 2009 open letter to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Conference.¹¹³⁸ The Taliban also began discussing issues such as good governance, civilian protection, and human rights in terms that were not dissimilar to Afghan government positions.¹¹³⁹ Some compared quite favorably to U.S. allies in the Gulf.

One potential explanation for the change in tone and substance was *taqiyya* – the statements were propaganda designed to deceive Afghans and the international community about the Taliban's true agenda. Their increased use of suicide bombings and victim-operated IEDs in 2009, for instance, certainly undermined elements of the Taliban narrative. On the other hand, they may have surmised that they were getting little strategic benefit from al Qaeda but incurring great costs in legitimacy. They may also have determined a need to focus on

¹¹³⁶ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, "Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen on the Occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr," 19 September 2009.

¹¹³⁷ Vahid Brown, "Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban: "Diametrically Opposed"?" *Foreign Policy*, 22 October 2009.

¹¹³⁸ Voice of Jihad, "Open Letter of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to the Shanghai Summit," 14 October 2009.

¹¹³⁹ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan documents: Layha [Code of Conduct] (2006 and 2009); Conference statements: (29 June 2012); (24 December 2012); (2013); (5 May 2015); Eid al Adha and Eid al Fitr statements since 19 September 2009. Linschoten and Kuehn (February 2011); Dobbins & Malkasian (2015), 60-61. Bin Laden encouraged Mullah Omar to avoid shedding Muslim blood, see *Bin Laden's Bookshelf* (released 1 March 2016) "Letter to our Honored Commander of the Faithful."

governance and to adapt to Afghan expectations on various political and social issues.¹¹⁴⁰ The progressive statements were likely more reflective of the views of the political commission rather than the rank and file. Nonetheless, the new narrative on these issues caused no apparent ripple with the Taliban movement – a reasonable test for potential audience costs.¹¹⁴¹ Sincerity, of course, would need to be tested.

The Taliban senior leadership authorized their political commission in 2009 to begin outreach with the international community, including the United States. To support these efforts, the Taliban established an unofficial office in Doha, Qatar. This would give those such as Tayyab Agha who were not on the UN sanctions lists better access to the outside world. Having an office in Doha also helped the Taliban political commission operate independently of Pakistan.¹¹⁴² Diplomatic efforts by the Taliban required freedom of movement and the ability to meet interlocutors – an office in Pakistan could be subject to considerable pressure from the ISI. Because Qatar hosted a major U.S. military base, the Taliban believed that the Americans might be more willing to engage them in Doha. They likewise surmised that the Qataris could play a helpful intermediary role. Qatar, aspiring to be a diplomatic force in Gulf, accepted the opportunity.¹¹⁴³ By the end of 2011, the Taliban had reached out to over twenty countries and was participating in unofficial conferences in places such as Norway, Japan, and France.¹¹⁴⁴

¹¹⁴⁰ The Taliban also published a *Layha* – Code of Conduct – in 2006 and updated in 2009. Semple et al (2012), 12.

¹¹⁴¹ As we will see later when the Taliban discussed the opening of a political office in Doha in January 2012.

¹¹⁴² Personal discussions with Tayyab Agha 2011, Doha; Interviewees F, H, J, L; Rubin (4 June 2016)

¹¹⁴³ Kamrava (2015).

¹¹⁴⁴ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (December 24, 2012); Graham Bowley and Matthew Rosenberg, “Afghan Officials Hail Talks with Insurgents,” *New York Times*, 28 June 2012.

Pakistan, with its national security policy run by the Army, was arguably more of a unitary actor than the others. Their spy service, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) – whose external operations branch is responsible for monitoring, liaising, and supporting various “asymmetric groups” – is subordinate to the Chief of Army Staff. As Stephen Tankel notes, scholars have developed three broad terms to explain government relationships toward militant groups: collaboration (active support), enablement (passive support), and belligerence. Borrowing a term from the field of economics, Tankel adds a fourth relationship: coopetition, which denotes “frenemies” or groups that straddle more than one category.¹¹⁴⁵ The categorization has its limits, but is sufficiently useful to describe the relationship between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban, and its effects on reconciliation.

The ISI’s command and control relationship with Kashmir-oriented groups like *Lashkar e-Taiba* is collaborative. Their support for Afghan insurgent groups during the Soviet war could be described as somewhere between collaborative and enabling – providing logistics, funding, and expertise, but normally not directing operations in Afghanistan.¹¹⁴⁶ In contrast, the ISI’s relationship with *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) – or the Pakistani Taliban – on the other hand is one of belligerence.¹¹⁴⁷ The Pakistani relationship with the Afghan Taliban appears to be a hybrid. The Taliban clearly have sanctuary in Pakistan, particularly within the densely populated refugee camps that have been in existence since the late 1970s, where they can recruit, train, plan, and gather logistics. The Afghan Taliban, moreover, has been de-stabilizing the India-friendly Afghan government, something that works to Pakistan’s interests. The latter may see little need to assert direct control – the attempt to do so would likely create greater

¹¹⁴⁵ Tankel (2016), p. 1-2; Pillar (2005), 117–44.

¹¹⁴⁶ Tellis (March 2012).

¹¹⁴⁷ U.S. National Counter Terrorism Center (26 January 2017), “Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.”

animosity. The relationship, however, is distant. The Afghan Taliban both needs and fears Pakistan.¹¹⁴⁸ They need the sanctuary; they fear being perceived as or coerced into being a puppet.¹¹⁴⁹ This dilemma helps to explain why the Taliban sought a political office in Doha – a country outside Pakistan’s orbit and pressure. The ISI longstanding relationship with the Haqqani Taliban, on the other hand, is much closer to collaboration.¹¹⁵⁰ Occupying parts of North Waziristan, the Haqqanis (who are also believed to have closer ties with al Qaeda) have been useful to the ISI as intermediaries with various TTP groups and with the Quetta-based Taliban leadership. In return, the Haqqanis receive direct support from the ISI, enabling them to carry out high-profile operations inside Afghanistan.

This view of the relationship is not universal. Many Afghans and some US officials and scholars view Pakistan’s relationship with the Afghan Taliban as puppet-master to puppet – an extreme form of collaboration.¹¹⁵¹ Such views are often corroborated in remarks by Pakistani officials, who have recently been open about the existence of Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan.¹¹⁵² In early 2010, Mullah Omar’s deputy Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar was apprehended in Karachi, allegedly for participating in unauthorized talks.¹¹⁵³ A Pakistani security official told *The New York Times*, “We picked up Baradar . . . because [the Taliban] were trying to make a deal without us. We protect the Taliban. They are dependent on us. We are not going to allow them to make a deal with Karzai and the Indians.”¹¹⁵⁴ Such statements seem proof positive of

¹¹⁴⁸ Interviewees F, , H, I, J; Azamy (2 March 2015).

¹¹⁴⁹ Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016), 92.

¹¹⁵⁰ Fair (15 May 2015); Bergen, ed. (2013); Brown and Rassler (2013). For an alternative view see Lieven (2011).

¹¹⁵¹ Barnett Rubin (10 January 2016); Reidel (24 August 2013); Matt Waldman (June 2010). Both Reidel and Waldman note significant limitations on Pakistan’s influence. Azmat Khan (1 February 2012); *Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies* (3 July 2013); Sanjay Kumar (30 July 2015); Curtis (15 August 2015).

¹¹⁵² Siddique (3 March 2016).

¹¹⁵³ Mashal (26 December 2016).

¹¹⁵⁴ Filkins (22 August 2010).

Pakistan's control of the Afghan Taliban. However, they are also consistent with the hybrid model, in which Pakistan acquiesces in Taliban presence and provides enabling support, but will act against them when its interests are threatened. The hybrid model also better explains the Taliban decision to put the political office in Doha and Pakistan's adverse reaction to it.¹¹⁵⁵

The nature of the relationship is important for reconciliation. Were Pakistan the puppet-master, they could have delivered the Taliban to negotiations. These have been the demands of the Afghan and U.S. governments. If, however, the relationship is more of a hybrid in which the Taliban are autonomous in their strategic decision-making but not fully independent (due to the needs and constraints of sanctuary), then the prospects of Pakistan forcing the Taliban into negotiations are unrealistic. As Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid conclude, "No state can be successfully pressured into acts it considers suicidal."¹¹⁵⁶ Pakistan has not been against reconciliation, but they want to assure their interests in the outcome and this presents a major obstacle given their historic tensions with Afghanistan and India. As such, they have opposed the capitulation and the co-opt and defect models because they believe the result would be a stable, hostile, pro-India Afghanistan.

Exploratory Talks: Building and Damaging Confidence

Political and bureaucratic frictions within the U.S. government, the lack of a body of expert knowledge for wartime negotiations, and major resistance from Karzai, undermined the reconciliation effort as exploratory talks began. In late 2010 US officials began meeting periodically with Tayyab Agha. After a few sessions, the talks centered on confidence building

¹¹⁵⁵ For instance, Taliban reportedly arrested members of Tayyab Agha's family in connection to his relocation to Doha; Interviewees F and J; Rubin (4 June 2016)

¹¹⁵⁶ Rubin & Rashid (2008), 36.

measures. The Taliban wanted several prisoners released, particularly five senior leaders detained in the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo (GTMO). They also wanted UN sanctions on them lifted and recognition of their political office in Doha. In turn, the United States wanted the Taliban to release Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. soldier they captured in 2009, and for the Taliban to denounce international terrorism, announce support for a peace process, and to begin meeting with the Afghan government.¹¹⁵⁷ The Taliban said they would talk with the Afghan government at the end of the confidence-building process.¹¹⁵⁸ The talks continued throughout 2011 and into 2012. Karzai was informed of the main points after each meeting.¹¹⁵⁹

Grossman and I joined the talks in mid-2011 as the confidence building measures were gaining definition. The London conference in early 2011 had solidified Karzai's call for December 2014 to be the end of the ISAF combat mission. Obama's speech in June 2011 specified that transition to ANSF-led security was to be complete by the end of 2014.¹¹⁶⁰ The timeline announcements likely solidified the Taliban's negotiating strategy. Having withstood the surge, they had no incentive to negotiate an end to the conflict until they could take on the Afghan government after international forces had left. They also had little incentive to make compromises that might cause tension within their ranks, particularly any actions that might confer legitimacy on the Afghan government.

Grossman played the hand he was dealt as well as he could. He focused on creating a sequence of confidence-building measures designed to result, step-by-step, in the opening of a Taliban political office in Doha and Taliban statements denouncing international terrorism and

¹¹⁵⁷ See Ahmed Rashid (2012), 113-136; Grossman (2013), 28.

¹¹⁵⁸ Ryan, Strobel and Hosenball (19 December 2011); personal recollections from meetings in Doha, August and September 2011.

¹¹⁵⁹ Grossman (2013), 28.

¹¹⁶⁰ The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan" 22 June 2011.

supporting a peace process; a series of detainee releases in which a portion of the GTMO-5 would be transferred to Doha; Bergdahl released; the remainder of the GTMO-5 sent to Doha; and then meetings with the Afghan government.¹¹⁶¹ A couple of obstacles remained. First, the Taliban needed to agree to terms of reference for the detainees sent to Doha which included limitations on activities and a travel ban until the end of 2014. Second, they needed to agree to rules for the political office. These included certain restrictions, most importantly, that the office not appear as an embassy or use the name “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.”

Tayyab Agha was soft-spoken, even-tempered, and highly pragmatic. His closely cropped hair and beard little resembled the 2001 pictures of him. He earned Mullah Omar’s trust as his secretary and in 2009 became the head of the political commission. He described the Taliban’s views of the conflict in two dimensions: external and internal. The Taliban wanted to deal first with the external conflict (particularly with the United States), and then address the internal conflict.¹¹⁶² The goal of addressing the external conflict was the withdrawal of *all* foreign forces – the international coalition as well as non-Afghans fighting the government. By this he meant al Qaeda and other foreign militant organizations. The lifting of international sanctions, establishment of the political office, and transfer of the GTMO-5 were the confidence-builders he said the Taliban needed to move forward on including the Afghan government in meetings. As Taliban experts explained, GTMO was a symbol to the Taliban of injustice.¹¹⁶³ The five detainees they wanted released had either surrendered to the Northern Alliance or turned

¹¹⁶¹ Grossman (2013), 28.

¹¹⁶² Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, (3 January 2012); Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: “Declaration About the Suspension of Dialogue with the Americans, the Office in Qatar, and Its Political Activity,” 15 March 2012; Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Regarding the Participation of its Representative in an Academic Conference in Japan,” 29 June 2012.

¹¹⁶³ Interviewees F, J, I, Y, Z.

themselves in based on agreements that they would be free to live in peace. The GTMO transfers were their biggest test of American sincerity.

Some administration officials, to include ones at State and Defense, viewed the Taliban participation in talks as insincere. This was mainly based on a misguided belief that if the Taliban wanted peace they would first stop fighting. High profile or large-scale attacks were cited as proof of Taliban mendacity, even as the United States continued night raids and major operations against them. There was a clear incongruity in the view that the United States could fight and talk but the Taliban could not. Some exchanges with very senior officials became intense over these issues. Such challenges illustrated the importance of taking the effort slowly and step-by-step to build political space on all sides. If U.S. officials found the notion of talks with the Taliban distasteful, many Afghans had far stronger reactions. Administration officials often wanted big unilateral signals from the Taliban as proof of sincerity. This was unrealistic and potentially counter-productive.

Intelligence officials and Taliban experts often described the Taliban as a decentralized, pragmatic, consensus-based organization.¹¹⁶⁴ If they have an ideology, it is unity and the prevention of disunity and dissension. Although Mullah Omar was the iconic leader of the movement, he did not rule by *diktat*. To maintain unity, the Taliban use councils (shuras and jirgas) to discuss issues, examine ideas, and come to consensus.¹¹⁶⁵ Changes do not occur in a traditional jirga-system except by unanimous approval. This approach lowers the risk of dissension, but makes decision-making very slow and very conservative. The status quo bias

¹¹⁶⁴ Jalali (Winter 2007-2008), 12; Farrell and Giustozzi (July 2013), 845–871; Interviewees F, G, J, I, Y, Z.

¹¹⁶⁵ For a detailed discussion of the evolution of Taliban command and control systems, see Franco and Guistozzi (2016), 249-286. See also Rashid (2000) 41-42; Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016), 93-6.

in an organization like the Taliban thus tends to be quite high. A major unilateral concession from the Taliban at that point was extremely unlikely.

Confidence-building measures consumed most of the U.S. – Taliban meetings, which were held for a couple hours once every four to six weeks or so through the summer and fall of 2011. Unfortunately, no minutes were taken. Tayyab Agha and the Qatari intermediaries spoke good English, in which the meetings were conducted, but it was clear to me from Agha's body language that he would sometimes miss parts of the conversation. I would note to Grossman when I detected this and he reiterated key points, but the absence of a written record of agreed items heightened the risk of misunderstandings. Nonetheless, texts containing the terms of reference for the Taliban political office went back and forth. These were agreed by November 2011, except for some ambiguity about the name. The terms of reference were sent to the Afghan government in advance of the hoped-for office opening in early 2012.¹¹⁶⁶

Tensions with Karzai over reconciliation were growing. The key points of each meeting with the Taliban, as Grossman noted, were relayed, but this was not creating ownership and buy-in.¹¹⁶⁷ Unlike the closely coordinated security transition effort, the United States had not developed a common view or approach with the Afghan government on reconciliation.¹¹⁶⁸ The U.S. and Afghan governments were far more aligned on security transition than they were on reconciliation, which made close coordination on the latter even more important. Defense officials expressed concerns about the lack of buy-in and coordination with the Afghan

¹¹⁶⁶ Ryan, Strobel & Hosenball (19 December 2011). Personal recollection as participant in discussions

¹¹⁶⁷ Interviewees F, H, J, L, M, P, Q.

¹¹⁶⁸ The *Inteqal* framework was established in 2010 to manage the Afghan-led Transition process. The Joint Afghan-NATO *Inteqal* Board (JANIB) is responsible for approving transition implementation plans and recommending areas to enter or complete the transition process. See 1230 Report (December 2012), 27-31; NATO, "Inteqal: Transition to Afghan lead," 7 January 2015. No similar effort was made to coordinate reconciliation.

government and the absence of a clear strategy, but no changes were forthcoming.¹¹⁶⁹ “Karzai is irrelevant,” a senior SRAP official told me at the time. “His interests are so different from ours that there is no point in trying to discuss it.”¹¹⁷⁰

Karzai, in fact, grew increasingly worried that the United States was attempting to make a deal with the Taliban as a cover for withdrawal, just as America did in Vietnam.¹¹⁷¹ A *Foreign Affairs* article by former U.S. diplomat Robert Blackwill argued for the soft-partition of Afghanistan. Karzai viewed this article as reflecting an option being considered seriously by the Obama administration – ceding the south largely to the Taliban (and Pakistan) in exchange for a cease-fire and an end to the conflict.¹¹⁷² He perceived the efforts by the United States on reconciliation to be dangerously naïve and potentially catastrophic.¹¹⁷³ The lack of serious engagement and coordination with Karzai on an effort so central to the political order and future of Afghanistan would have grave consequences.

These problems exploded into controversy just before the beginning of the Bonn II conference on 5 December 2011. The atmosphere in Kabul was highly charged, particularly after High Peace Council Chairman and former Afghan President Rabbani was killed in September by a suicide bomber posing as a Taliban representative for talks. Karzai’s political rival, Dr. Abdullah warned, “This is a lesson for all of us that we shouldn’t fool ourselves that this group, who has carried out so many crimes against the people of Afghanistan, are willing to make peace.”¹¹⁷⁴ A major concession to the Taliban in which the government looked powerless had

¹¹⁶⁹ Interview with Lieutenant General Terry A. Wolff.

¹¹⁷⁰ Discussion with senior SRAP official, November 2011.

¹¹⁷¹ Neumann (May 2015); p.11; Dobbins & Malkasian (2015), p. 58.

¹¹⁷² Blackwill (January/February 2011).

¹¹⁷³ Interviewees F, G, I, M, P, Q, W; Dobbins & Malkasian (2015), p. 58

¹¹⁷⁴ Alissa J. Rubin (20 September 2011).

a high risk of backlash among groups critical to Karzai's governing coalition. The way the Taliban office discussions were unfolding amplified these concerns. After receiving the unsigned agreement on the Taliban office, Karzai requested a meeting with Clinton. Participants with knowledge of the discussion recalled that Karzai was outraged at being blindsided with a *fait accompli*.¹¹⁷⁵ He demanded the effort be suspended until he had the opportunity to review and comment on the document. He recalled his Ambassador from Qatar a few days later.¹¹⁷⁶ The United States reluctantly acceded to his demands.

Frictions increased in Washington as well. Sensitive to how negotiating with the Taliban would be perceived by Congress, the White House arranged meetings with House and Senate leaders in the late fall of 2011 and January 2012.¹¹⁷⁷ An interagency team supported the briefings. Grossman outlined the different measures under consideration and explained that the entire focus of the effort was to arrange a meeting between the Afghan government and the Taliban. To manage expectations, he noted that the chances of success were low and surmised that the assassination of Rabbani and the 13 September 2011 attack on the U.S. embassy in Kabul may have reflected the Taliban's true intentions about peace.¹¹⁷⁸

That explanation came across to House and Senate leaders as a high-risk low-reward proposition. The Administration, they perceived, was having Grossman negotiate with the Taliban to recognize a political office in Doha, trade five Taliban senior leaders in GTMO for one U.S. soldier (who some believed had deserted), and lift UN sanctions – all with the aim of

¹¹⁷⁵ Discussion with former senior Afghan official, January 2014; Interviewees F, J, L, M.

¹¹⁷⁶ Nordlund and Sahak (15 December 2011).

¹¹⁷⁷ Nasr (2013), 57-58.

¹¹⁷⁸ Personal recollections from the meetings. For more on the discussions with Congress, see O'Keefe (3 June 2014); Mack (3 June 2014); for the attack on the U.S. embassy, see Alissa J. Rubin, Rivera, and Healy (13 September 2011).

getting the Taliban to agree to a meeting with the Afghan government. Why, they questioned, was the Administration even considering such a bad deal? These concessions, they argued, would improve the Taliban's legitimacy and capabilities, and place American soldiers at greater risk, for no meaningful return. Those present for the briefings were many of the same Congressional leaders who received testimony from Defense and State officials that everything was on track in Afghanistan and that the risks were manageable.¹¹⁷⁹ The discussion was leaked to the press immediately. Members voiced strong opposition.¹¹⁸⁰

Still, the Administration sought to lay the foundations for a potential detainee exchange. Some observers mistakenly believe the Defense Department opposed the effort and tried to derail reconciliation talks.¹¹⁸¹ Defense officials did want to take smaller steps first, because transferring detainees from GTMO had become highly politicized. Due to concerns that several detainees transferred by the Bush Administration to other countries had returned to the battlefield, the U.S. Congress passed legislation in 2009 that the Secretary of Defense had to personally notify Congress 30-days in advance of a transfer and to certify in writing that he had taken all measures necessary to ensure the individual would no longer pose a national security threat. The requirements were reaffirmed through 2014.¹¹⁸² In short, the Secretary of Defense would be held personally accountable if a transferred detainee returned to the battlefield. The Obama Administration often complained that such provisions made GTMO transfers virtually impossible.¹¹⁸³ Pre-maturely moving forward on such a potentially explosive

¹¹⁷⁹ See previous chapter.

¹¹⁸⁰ Grossman (2013), 34; Walsh and Barrett (4 June 2014); Savage (20 June 2013); Leopold (4 March 2015); Sanger and Rosenberg (8 June 2014).

¹¹⁸¹ See Dobbins & Malkasian (2015), 57.

¹¹⁸² National Defense Authorization Act (2013), Section 1033.

¹¹⁸³ Wakeman (25 June 2013).

issue could create even more obstacles for future transfers, heighten suspicion and cynicism, and potentially undermine the entire effort.

To meet the certification requirements, the Principals Committee determined that the United States needed sufficient assurances from the Qatari government that the detainees would be fully monitored, not allowed to engage in acts against the United States or its allies, and not permitted to leave the country. A senior Defense official and I worked closely with the Qatari Attorney General on the provisions, capturing them in writing over a series of meetings. After a few months, we came to agreement on the terms of reference and gained the approvals of Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Clinton. The Qataris, however, would enforce the provisions only if the Taliban agreed to them. They understandably wanted the Taliban to share the blame for any transgression. The Taliban, however, had still refused to agree to a travel ban. When the problem was raised with the Principals Committee in late 2011, their decision was unanimous and unequivocal – the transfers could not take place until the Taliban agreed to the travel ban.¹¹⁸⁴

Coming off the Rails

Confirmation bias, bureaucratic frictions, and the Obama administration's deteriorating relationship with Karzai continued to undermine the prospects of reconciliation. Meanwhile, the draw-down of international forces was eroding American leverage for both reconciliation and transition. With the Taliban intransigent on the travel ban and Karzai objecting to the Office, the process was stuck. Adding to the complications, discussions about the political

¹¹⁸⁴ Interviewees J, L, M, X.

office were leaked to the press.¹¹⁸⁵ This caused a major stir within the insurgency, noted former intelligence officials and Taliban experts. Taliban commanders wondered if the senior leaders were trying to cut a deal with Karzai.¹¹⁸⁶ Perhaps wanting to keep the effort secret until the agreement was finalized, the leadership had not fully socialized the political office and its purpose. The insurgent leadership went into damage control. “In this regard,” explained Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, “we have started preliminary talks and we have reached a preliminary understanding with relevant sides, including the government of Qatar, to have a political office for negotiations with the international community.” The office, he emphasized, was not going to talk with the Karzai government (a condition Karzai said was unacceptable). Reflecting how the Taliban leadership considered the conflict as having external and internal dimensions, he continued: “There are two essential sides in the current situation in the country that has been ongoing for the past 10 years. One is the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the other side is the United States of America and their foreign allies.”¹¹⁸⁷ He mentioned, in particular, that the Taliban sought the release of GTMO detainees.¹¹⁸⁸

This episode is revealing in how the Taliban leadership responds to the rank and file. As noted above, the *Eid* statements attributed to Mullah Omar from 2009 onward discussed a variety of issues regarding relationships with the international community, distancing themselves from terrorism, and relatively progressive statements on human rights. None of these statements created any dissension in the Taliban ranks. The announcement about the office did. Even though the statement came from the Taliban spokesman, the rank and file likely surmised that such a major step would not have occurred without the Taliban leader’s blessing. From 3

¹¹⁸⁵ Dorell (27 December 2011); *USA Today* (4 January 2012); Rosenberg (4 January 2012).

¹¹⁸⁶ Interviewees F, G, I, J; Rubin (4 June 2016).

¹¹⁸⁷ *USA Today* (4 January 2012)

¹¹⁸⁸ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, (3 January 2012); Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (15 March 2012)

January until 15 February 2012, the Taliban issued no fewer than seven statements concerning the office and ongoing negotiations.¹¹⁸⁹ The winter months are when Taliban leaders tend to gather in Pakistan for annual discussions about their upcoming military campaign, so the Doha office was likely a subject of debate. The Taliban leadership managed to build the necessary consensus about the office during that time, but would need to proceed more carefully in the future.¹¹⁹⁰

The administration wanted to get the Taliban office moving forward again. Defense officials, myself included, continued to express concerns about the lack of coordination and agreed framework with the Afghan government. To get the process back on track, Grossman arranged for a meeting with Karzai in January 2012 before heading to Doha for another round of talks with the Taliban. Karzai made three demands for the Office: Qatari government representatives needed to come to Kabul to explain the office to him, the Afghan government would re-write the rules as the grantor of the office to the Taliban, and the Taliban had to meet in advance with the Afghan government.¹¹⁹¹ These were three well-crafted poison pills designed to derail what Karzai perceived to be a highly dangerous process.

Grossman flew to Doha and outlined Karzai's three demands. The Taliban and Qatari representatives reacted in shock.¹¹⁹² Karzai had insulted the Qataris a month earlier by recalling his Ambassador; the Gulf nation believed that they had done nothing wrong and were trying to be helpful in resolving the conflict. The Americans had said repeatedly that they had Karzai on board. For the Qataris to come penitently to Kabul to seek Karzai's forgiveness and blessing

¹¹⁸⁹ See Taliban "Voice of Jihad" website.

¹¹⁹⁰ Interviewees F and J. Farrell and Semple (2015/16), 98-9

¹¹⁹¹ Grossman (2013), 29.

¹¹⁹² Personal recollection from the January 2012 meetings in Doha with Qatari officials and Taliban representative Tayyab Agha.

was tough to swallow. Second, the Taliban were not willing to take the office as a gift from the Afghan government; that would be recognizing the government's legitimacy before they were ready to do so and placing the Taliban in a supplicant position. Third, the meeting with the Afghan government was agreed to come at the end of the U.S. – Taliban confidence-building process. Particularly given the internal strife over the office earlier that month and their explanations that they were not talking with Karzai, the Taliban could not accept meeting with the Afghan government as a pre-condition.¹¹⁹³

Tayyab Agha replied that he would consult with “the leadership” about the demands and reiterated the Taliban's non-concurrence on the travel ban for the GTMO-5. I asked him to consider whether the five were better off in GTMO or spending time with their families in Doha. Two months later, the Taliban issued a statement suspending the talks, suggesting that the United States was negotiating in bad faith.¹¹⁹⁴ They had always considered Karzai a puppet. If the Americans were serious about the effort, they believed, they would have convinced or forced him to consent to the office rather than simply accepting and verbalizing his demands. In fact, the United States had a long history of ignoring or overriding Karzai's wishes and concerns on matters like civilian casualties, detentions, night raids, the 2009 surge, parallel governance structures, anti-corruption measures, and reconciliation.

The process remained in limbo for the rest of 2012. On 1 May, the one-year anniversary of the successful bin Laden raid, Obama announced during a speech at Bagram Air Base that he had signed a Strategic Partnership agreement with the Afghan government. He also provided an update on the five lines of effort and the pace of the draw-down of U.S. forces. “In coordination with the Afghan government,” he explained, “my administration has been in direct discussions

¹¹⁹³ Interviewees F, J, L, M.

¹¹⁹⁴ Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (15 March 2012); Kate Clark (16 March 2012).

with the Taliban. We've made it clear that they can be a part of this future if they break with al Qaeda, renounce violence and abide by Afghan laws.... The path to peace is now set before them. Those who refuse to walk it will face strong Afghan security forces, backed by the United States and our allies.”¹¹⁹⁵ The Taliban were unmoved.

By continuing the draw-down the United States was losing negotiating leverage. The military pressure kept declining. The Taliban had every reason to believe they could wait out the American presence and that their leverage would be far stronger when fighting with the Afghan government unaided by over 100,000 international troops. They would be very unlikely to risk dissension in the ranks regarding the talks. If Obama viewed that working toward a peace process was more important than completing the draw-down, he could amass plenty of reasons for extending troop presence – the September 2011 attack on the U.S. embassy, the assassination of Rabbani, Pakistani intransigence, the Taliban's suspension of talks. His administration, as discussed in Chapter 7, continued to testify that the war was on track.

In early 2013 the Qataris attempted to re-start discussions on the Taliban office. The Taliban indicated that were willing to make another go at it, and U.S. officials put pressure on the Afghan government to move forward. Karzai acceded, but insisted that the office was for negotiations between the High Peace Council (HPC) and Taliban. The joint statement by Obama and Karzai in January 2013 summarized the agreed points, “The Leaders said that they would support an office in Doha for the purpose of negotiations between the High Peace Council and the authorized representatives of the Taliban. In this context, the Leaders called on the armed opposition to join a political process, including by taking those steps necessary to open a Taliban office. They urged the Government of Qatar to facilitate this effort.” They also agreed to negotiate a bi-lateral security agreement (BSA). “The scope and nature of any

¹¹⁹⁵ The White House, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan,” 1 May 2012.

possible post-2014 U.S. presence, legal protections for U.S. forces, and security cooperation between the two countries is to be specified in the Bilateral Security Agreement.”¹¹⁹⁶ Obama made quite clear that without a BSA, the United States would not maintain troops in Afghanistan after 2014. His withdrawal from Iraq after SOFA negotiations failed underscored the point.

U.S. officials worked over the next few months to get an agreement so the office could be opened. A team of us met with Afghan National Security Advisor Dadfar Spanta in May 2013 who said that the Afghan government could support a US-Qatar-Taliban agreement on the office if the Afghan government could review and approve the document, and if the Qataris would agree to a strategic partnership, in writing, with the Afghan government first. The Qataris demurred. Spanta then suggested that there be no written agreements at all. If there could be no written agreement between the two governments, there should be no written agreement between the Qataris and the Taliban. All parties, including the Taliban, agreed to this idea.¹¹⁹⁷ Seeking assurances, Karzai asked for a letter from President Obama that the office would be for the purposes of negotiations with the HPC and not refer to itself as “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” or look or act as an Embassy. Obama provided the letter in June.¹¹⁹⁸ The stage was set for the office to be opened. One potentially fatal flaw, however, existed. Without a written agreement about the rules of the office, the Taliban could largely do what it wanted. These concerns were not addressed.

¹¹⁹⁶ The White House, “Joint Statement by President Obama and President Karzai,” 11 January 2013.

¹¹⁹⁷ Interviewee J and L; personal recollections. Karzai spokesman Aimal Faizi incorrectly blames Ambassador James Dobbins for rejecting an agreement between Qatar and the Afghan government. See Osman and Clark (9 July 2013).

¹¹⁹⁸ The letter’s key assurances were confirmed by a White House official to *The New York Times*. Rubin & Nordlund (19 June 2013); *Pajhwok* (27 June 2013).

The date for the office opening was set for 18 June 2013. This was the same day as the transition ceremony marking the transfer of lead security responsibilities across the country from ISAF to the ANSF. This was to be the signature event of the civil-military campaign since 2009.¹¹⁹⁹ When I asked if the U.S. should off-set the dates to avoid the risk of stepping on the transition ceremony, a White House official said that having both on the same day would be a great statement of progress. Indicators that the Taliban were going to make a spectacle of the office opening prompted Defense and Embassy-Kabul officials to suggest that the United States ensure its requirements were being met.¹²⁰⁰

The transition ceremony took place in the morning to moderate media coverage. A couple hours later the Qatari-based *al Jazeera* televised worldwide the opening ceremony for the Taliban office. International press filled the large room. A senior official from the Qatari foreign ministry stood at a podium next to a Taliban representative. Taliban flags adorned the ceremony. A large banner behind the speakers declared the opening of the “Political Office of the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*” [emphasis added]. The office was housed in a large enclosed compound in an area of Doha where other embassies were located. “Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan” was etched into a plaque affixed to the outside wall. A Taliban flag was raised in the courtyard.¹²⁰¹ A U.S. official involved in the process reportedly explained the importance of the event to a journalist,

It ... very much reflects this whole process, which began with a series of loya jirgas that Karzai held in 2010 and 2011. It includes the Karzai visit here to Washington in January [2013]. And this is an Afghan initiative and it’s a perfect representation of what

¹¹⁹⁹ NATO, “NATO Secretary General in Kabul as Afghan security forces take lead countrywide,” 18 June 2013.

¹²⁰⁰ Personal recollections of meetings and discussions in the lead-up to the office opening; interviewees F, H, J.

¹²⁰¹ *Reuters* (18 June 2013).

we mean by Afghan-led, Afghan-owned. So if the Afghan delegation makes this a priority in their engagements with the Taliban, then that's completely in keeping with Afghan ownership.¹²⁰²

Karzai and Afghan officials were apoplectic. The United States asked Qatar to suspend the office. U.S. officials blamed the Qataris for this debacle, and some of that was rightly placed.¹²⁰³ But a large burden falls on the Obama administration for poor coordination, ignoring warning signs, and abysmal communication.¹²⁰⁴ The next morning Karzai announced the suspension of talks on the BSA because of “inconsistent statements and actions in regard to the peace process.”¹²⁰⁵ The Taliban office opening had violated nearly every assurance given by Obama. Protests erupted in Kabul.¹²⁰⁶ The new SRAP, Ambassador Jim Dobbins, and an interagency team went to Kabul to try to assuage Karzai's outrage. The latter was convinced the fiasco was deliberate. “Unfortunately, the manner that the office was announced, including the title given to the office and the imagery on display, were all in breach of the written assurances we received from the U.S. government,” a senior Afghan official explained to the *Washington Post*.¹²⁰⁷ “The bizarre turn of events following the opening of the Taleban office in Doha,” Afghan analysts Borhan Osman and Kate Clark reflected, “has led many [Afghans] to wonder whether the affair could have been deliberately sabotaged. Was it possible it had just been badly handled?”¹²⁰⁸ The poorly coordinated effort to make progress on reconciliation had

¹²⁰² Kate Clark (19 June 2013).

¹²⁰³ Dobbins & Malkasian (2015), p. 57.

¹²⁰⁴ Nasr (2013), p. 58-59.

¹²⁰⁵ Clark (19 June 2013)

¹²⁰⁶ *Khaama Press* (29 June 2013).

¹²⁰⁷ DeYoung, Craig and Londoño (19 June 2013).

¹²⁰⁸ Osman & Kate Clark (9 July 2013)

adverse consequences on the civil-military campaign, transition, the BSA, and regional diplomacy – not to mention American credibility. “The reconciliation effort became too limited,” former Deputy SRAP Singh observed, “and was not fully connected to the strategy.”¹²⁰⁹

Fall-Out: BSA, Bergdahl, and the 2014 Elections

The ever-decreasing American leverage added to the strategic uncertainty as the 2014 elections approached with a peace-process nowhere in sight, the Taliban resilient, and the Afghan government continually plagued with problems of corruption and predation. International actors began further hedging their support for the Afghanistan project by increasing contacts with the Taliban. These factors eroded confidence in Kabul and persuaded Karzai to take an increasingly aggressive anti-American policy.

Karzai eventually permitted BSA negotiations to resume. While American and Afghan officials worked out an agreement Karzai called for a *loya jirga* to examine and recommend approval or disapproval on the text. The agreement was then to be sent to Parliament for approval before being signed by Karzai. This was also the time William Dalrymple’s book *Return of a King* was published, which discussed the sad reign of Afghan King Shah Shuja – the last Popalzai ruler before Karzai – who was considered a British puppet and was overthrown shortly after the disastrous British retreat from Kabul in 1842.¹²¹⁰ Already sensitive to being considered an American puppet, Karzai wanted to distribute the political risk as widely as possible.

¹²⁰⁹ Interview with Vikram Singh.

¹²¹⁰ Dalrymple (2013)

The support from the assembled delegates in favor of the BSA was overwhelming. Karzai, however, took to the podium and urged members against it.¹²¹¹ He waved the assurance letter Obama sent him regarding the BSA, recalling the earlier assurance letter about the Taliban office, and explained how U.S. promises could not be trusted.¹²¹² Karzai ultimately refused to sign the agreement – he had more to gain by standing up to the United States. The document would not be signed until October 2014, after the new Afghan Administration had come to power, and just two months before the U.S. was to end its combat mission. Neither Ashraf Ghani nor Abdullah Abdullah signed the agreement. That task was delegated to an unelected official, National Security Advisor Hanif Atmar.

As 2014 approached and the end of the U.S. combat mission loomed closer, discussions within the Obama Administration began to center on ways to try to recover Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl – the only American soldier in Taliban captivity. With the ongoing counterterrorism missions in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States was unwilling to refocus more resources to find him. I supported the idea of re-opening the detainee exchange provided the Taliban agreed to the travel ban and the trade was linked to a larger peace process. The Israelis, hardly slouches when it comes to dealing with militant groups, traded over 1000 prisoners for Gilad Shalit in 2011, a soldier held by Hamas since 2006.¹²¹³ The five Taliban detainees, after more than a decade in GTMO, would probably prefer to live with their families in Doha rather than try to assume a battlefield leadership role.¹²¹⁴ Besides, the Taliban had capable people in those roles already. The Taliban clearly wanted these five out of GTMO, which was leverage

¹²¹¹ Nordlund (24 November 2013)

¹²¹² Embassy of Afghanistan, “President Obama's Letter to President Karzai on BSA,” 20 November 2013.

¹²¹³ Booth (5 June 2014).

¹²¹⁴ The United States included family support provisions in the detainee transfer agreement to make re-location in Doha even more attractive (personal knowledge of the agreement).

the Obama administration could use for a greater return. I also surmised the Qataris valued their diplomatic role in the Gulf and that good relations with the United States would be a boost for them.¹²¹⁵ They had every reason to uphold their end of the agreement – which we negotiated in 2011 and 2012.

By May 2014, the Taliban finally caved on the travel ban, enabling the Qataris to sign the agreement and opening the door for the detainee transfers. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, in an act that took political courage, approved the transfers and signed the certification letter. He was the only American official to date to take on such risk in the reconciliation sphere. Bergdahl was repatriated in an impressive battlefield link-up between the Haqqani network of the Taliban and U.S. special operations forces on 4 June 2014. Some Congressional members and pundits cried foul that the five were transferred to Qatari custody without warning to Congress, in violation of the law, and that the effort was damaging to U.S. interests.¹²¹⁶ As of February 2017, all five remain quietly in Doha, following the rules we negotiated with the Qataris. The exchange, however, was not linked to any larger process.¹²¹⁷

Had U.S. and Afghan officials examined the issue dispassionately, they should have arrived at some very important conclusions from this about the Taliban. First, the exchange showed that the political commission in Doha are representatives of the Taliban leadership. The exchange had to be communicated from the Qataris to the political commission, then to the Taliban senior leadership in Pakistan, and then to the Haqqani network who was holding Bergdahl. The link-up of hostile forces in a combat zone to conduct a prisoner hand-over like this one was complex and high risk, and the Taliban political commission made it possible. Second, it helped answer

¹²¹⁵ Kamrava (2015).

¹²¹⁶ Savage and Sanger (3 June 2014).

¹²¹⁷ Sanger & Rosenberg (8 June 2014); Dobbins & Malkasian (2015), p. 57.

a lingering question about the relationship between the Haqqanis and the Taliban senior leadership. Despite public statements from Sirajuddin Haqqani that he was Taliban, some U.S. intelligence agencies and commands have persisted in believing they were separate.¹²¹⁸ The exchange showed that the Haqqanis were responsive to Taliban senior leader orders. Although several of their senior leaders were in custody, the Haqqanis did not demand their detainees be included in the exchange.¹²¹⁹ Third, it showed the political commission can make commitments on behalf of the senior leadership and follow through. These suggest the political commission should be considered a legitimate conduit for talks, but it has been largely ignored in reconciliation discussions since then.

The uncertainty over the bi-lateral security agreement, meanwhile, likely prompted more aggressive hedging strategies by key actors in Afghanistan and the region. Businesses were even more reluctant to invest in Afghanistan. Capital flight continued to be a major problem. Real estate prices plummeted. Kleptocratic behavior became more aggressive as officials sought to extract all they could and tuck it away overseas in case things fell apart.¹²²⁰ The worth of the Afghan Afghani plummeted. On 1 August 2013, the it traded at 53 to the dollar. Two years later it was trading at 64 to the dollar – a 21 percent decline. The situation may have created even greater incentives for electoral fraud in both the Ghani and Abdullah camps.¹²²¹ The impasse over the election results heightened the risk of political violence as Abdullah supporters such as the powerful Balkh governor Atta Mohammad Noor threatened civil war.¹²²²

¹²¹⁸ BBC News (3 October 2011).

¹²¹⁹ Interviewees F and J.

¹²²⁰ Byrd, Johnson and Tasal (4 February 2014); Jason Campbell (12 March 2014).

¹²²¹ Felbab-Brown (17 November 2013); General Joseph F. Dunford (12 March 2014), 8-9; Lieutenant General Michael Flynn (11 February 2014).

¹²²² Stancati, Hodge, and Nissenbaum (8 July 2014); Rosenberg and Ahmad (7 July 2014).

Carter Malkasian, Afghanistan expert and former senior political advisor to ISAF Commander General Dunford (2013-4), notes that these problems were occurring anyway due to the drawdown of international forces.¹²²³ Nonetheless, the anxieties surrounding the BSA intensified the toxic environment of 2014 and increased American frustration and fatigue.

A disputed outcome in the 2014 Presidential election to replace Hamid Karzai resulted, after months of wrangling, in a U.S.-brokered Government of National Unity consisting of two rival camps led by President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. The provisions of the deal included, within 2 years, electoral reform prior to Parliamentary elections scheduled for 2015, district council elections, and a constitutional *loya jirga* to consider, among other issues, whether to institutionalize a Prime Minister position.¹²²⁴ The lingering animosities and competing visions of government guaranteed gridlock and made progress on these sensitive issues virtually impossible. Having rebuffed the BSA, Karzai positioned himself as a political figure of significant stature and has been agitating against the government since he stepped down from power.¹²²⁵

The Afghan government continued their refusal to engage the Taliban political office, insisting instead that the Pakistanis deliver the Taliban to the table. In hopes of gaining progress while gauging Pakistani intentions, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, in the face of stiff political opposition, began efforts toward a rapprochement with Afghanistan's eastern neighbor which even included agreements on intelligence sharing.¹²²⁶ To show their bona fides, the Pakistanis

¹²²³ Interview with Carter Malkasian, 25 August 2016.

¹²²⁴ Rubin and Gagnon (August 2016).

¹²²⁵ Mashal (20 December 2015); Mashal (5 August 2016); van Bijlert and Adili (29 May 2016).

¹²²⁶ Farrell & Semple (December 2015–January 2016), 88-9; Faizi (4 June 2015) [NOTE: Faizi is a Karzai spokesman]; Behzan (21 May 2015).

delivered three un-empowered Taliban interlocutors to talks in Muree, Pakistan, in 2015.¹²²⁷ A second round was cancelled as the death of Mullah Omar was revealed to have occurred in 2013. The Taliban political commission, however, noted that the Taliban were not engaged in any talks because, as the only entity authorized to engage in them, they had not been contacted.¹²²⁸ The Quadrilateral Coordination Group Process (Afghanistan, Pakistan, US, China) was formed with the same goal of having Pakistan deliver the Taliban to talks. To date it has been a dismal failure.¹²²⁹

Conclusion

Bargaining asymmetries undermined the prospects for a negotiated outcome in Afghanistan. President Obama's decision on 1 December 2009 to announce both a surge of forces and a timeline for withdrawal limited American leverage during exploratory talks with the Taliban. The insurgency aimed to gain concessions that improved their legitimacy while coaxing the United States to complete withdrawal, but were not interested in negotiating an end to the conflict. As the drawdown continued, American bargaining power declined further. By March 2012 the Taliban postponed talks with the United States. The persistent and increasingly specific withdrawal announcements likely doomed any hopes of a political settlement or peace process prior to the withdrawal of American troops. Meanwhile, the military instrument continued to enjoy high-levels of White House scrutiny that diplomatic elements never underwent. The number of meetings about matters far more important to the war's outcome

¹²²⁷ Johnson and Zahra-Malik (8 July 2015); Osman (5 August 2015).

¹²²⁸ Osman (5 August 2015); Mashal (9 July 2015).

¹²²⁹ Rubin (4 June 2016)

such as political transition, regional diplomacy and a reconciliation strategy were comparatively few and far between.¹²³⁰

Bureaucratic frictions, lack of vision, poor coordination, and sloppy execution damaged the reconciliation effort. The lack of agreed conceptual frameworks for war termination inhibited clear communication and consensus-building within the U.S. government, making the status quo trajectory even more difficult to change.¹²³¹ The distributed authorities for the five strategic lines of effort and unwillingness of the Obama administration to set priorities reinforced bureaucratic silos. Individual actions in one line of effort, like the abortive 18 June 2013 opening of the Taliban political office, created set-backs in others. In the end, U.S. reconciliation efforts further poisoned the relationship with Karzai, undermined American credibility in Afghanistan and the region, and heightened political uncertainty and instability as Afghanistan approached the 2014 elections and the end of the international combat mission. None of these problems were inevitable, nor were they easily preventable.

The lack of a coordinated strategy with the Afghan government increased the risk that sensitive issues such as reconciliation would become major points of friction. These problems exacerbated the prisoner's dilemma challenge within Afghanistan and the region – each party recognized the benefits of cooperation toward peace, but no one trusted the others enough to take any risk to bring it about. Risk aversion and mutual suspicions created further obstacles. These issues made a credible reconciliation strategy even more necessary. The U.S. government, however, proved incapable of delivering one.

¹²³⁰ Interviewees H, J, L, M, W, X. The White House did hold many meetings about the more tactical aspects of reconciliation, particularly in advance of meetings with the Taliban. These, however, mostly focused on coordinating talking points and sequencing of confidence-building measures.

¹²³¹ See also, Matt Waldman (July 2013), 829–32.

In Iraq, Bush changed strategy when his beliefs in the importance of success were affirmed, facts were presented on how the current strategy was failing, and an alternative was offered that would achieve his goals. That never occurred for Obama on Afghanistan, in part because his definition of success increasingly centered on ending the U.S. role in the war rather than achieving certain security and stability outcomes. Withdrawal timelines became rigid. Defense and State failed to offer any compelling strategic alternatives that might have addressed Obama's concerns about open-ended commitments, but stood a greater chance of achieving stated policy goals. The status quo held obvious risks of leaving Afghanistan largely on its own to deal with an industrial-scale insurgency that was still allied with al Qaeda. This situation holds the greatest chance of allowing the country to once again become a terror safe-haven – an outcome both Bush and Obama said was a vital national interest to prevent. Inadequate attention to war termination helped bring this situation about.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

America's military, claims General David H. Petraeus and scholar Michael O'Hanlon, is the world's best.¹²³² If that is so, why have major post-9/11 military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan turned into bloody and expensive quagmires? Even smaller scale interventions in places such as Libya, Syria, and Yemen have met with poor results. The Chilcot report, the official inquiry into the United Kingdom's decision to go to war in Iraq, has important cautionary implications about following America's lead.¹²³³ It also reveals stark limits on the influence of American allies on U.S. strategic decision-making.

This thesis fills an important gap in war termination scholarship regarding the unique challenges of irregular war for intervening powers. The three hypotheses provide a clear and compelling framework for examining such conflicts.

Hypothesis #1: *The failure to consider war termination heightens the risk of selecting a myopic strategy that has a low probability of success.*

Hypothesis #2: *Cognitive obstacles, political frictions, and patron-client problems can impede the ability to recognize and abandon an ineffective or losing strategy.*

Hypothesis #3. *When the United States tires of the war and decides to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries can undermine the prospects of a favorable outcome.*

A consistent shortfall in Iraq and Afghanistan has been a lack of attention to war termination from the outset of policy-making and strategy development. This has induced three major problems that have made quagmires more likely. First, the U.S. has undertaken these major

¹²³² Petraeus and O'Hanlon (September/October 2016).

¹²³³ The Report of the Iraq Inquiry (6 July 2016).

interventions with a myopic strategy that implicitly assumed decisive military victory. This led to an under-appreciation for the importance of critical factors, such as host nation politics and insurgent sustainability, and promoted a tendency to ignore or dismiss early negotiating opportunities. Second, the U.S. government has been slow to modify a losing or ineffective strategy due to cognitive biases, political and bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems. Third, as the US tired of each war and signaled a desire to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries have prevented favorable and durable outcomes. Attempts at negotiations and transition have consistently fallen far short of expectations. These problems interacted with one another in unique ways to produce different trajectories into intractable conflicts.

This explanation for why the United States interventions turned into quagmires does not necessarily compete with potential alternatives. This thesis provides the argument that these conflicts were likely unwinnable with much needed analytic rigor and an empirically-based Critical Factors Framework.¹²³⁴ To date, assessments about the prospects of victory have relied largely on qualitative judgments. Lyndon Johnson's Under Secretary of State George Ball, for instance, wrote on 1 July 1965 that the Vietnam war was unwinnable, arguing "No one has demonstrated that a white ground force of whatever size can win a guerrilla war."¹²³⁵ Those believing that the United States could be successful countered with other qualitative arguments, which President Johnson accepted. Regarding Iraq, James Dobbins wrote in 2005, "The beginning of wisdom is to recognize that the ongoing war in Iraq is not one that the United States can win. As a result of its initial miscalculations, misdirected planning, and inadequate preparation, Washington has lost the Iraqi people's confidence and consent, and it is unlikely

¹²³⁴ See the Critical Factors Framework, p. 30.

¹²³⁵ FRUS 1964–1968, VOLUME III, VIETNAM, JUNE–DECEMBER 1965. Document 40. Paper by the Under Secretary of State (Ball).

to win them back.”¹²³⁶ The near-term success of the 2007 surge seemed to vindicate those who believed the war could still be won. Maliki’s aggressive sectarianism, unconstrained due to the absence of American forces, brought about a Sunni Arab backlash in the form of the Islamic State. The pro and con arguments around Obama’s Afghanistan surge, this thesis has shown, were similarly qualitative and not informed by empirical studies.

The analysis in Chapter Two leading to the development of the Critical Factors Framework and Hypothesis #1 provides a more empirical basis for arguments about the prospects for an intervention. In the case of Vietnam both critical factors pointed in the wrong direction: the insurgency had tangible internal and external support and the host nation government was unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and insurgent controlled areas. The empirical work in this thesis shows that no counterinsurgency has been successful when the critical factors are negative. Iraq and Afghanistan entailed regime-changes. Success relied on preventing these two critical factors from materializing. Neglect of the war termination issue during strategy development impeded the United States’ ability to recognize these factors and take appropriate action. In both cases, the critical factors turned sour. Whether an external power from a different culture can have a successful regime change and prevent the factors from turning negative requires further research. The Critical Factors Framework and Hypothesis #1 give policy-makers and scholars a methodology to evaluate the prospects of a successful intervention against an insurgency.

The presumption of decisive victory and the belief that with enough commitment and goodwill the United States can solve any problem across the globe could also be part of an American

¹²³⁶ Dobbins (2005).

strategic culture.¹²³⁷ Such belief in exceptionalism could be motivating the United States to intervene into conflicts that it cannot possibly win or pursue strategies that have little chances of success. Likewise, the notion of strategic distance could be a factor.¹²³⁸ A longitudinal study of counterinsurgency could examine how often an intervening power from a very different culture was a successful counterinsurgent. Impossible strategic distance could become an important and more nuanced consideration than more categorical statements of American capacity for counterinsurgency. To be sure, the quality of insurgent strategy and capabilities, as well as that of the host nation, is critical to the larger question of which side wins or loses. Those questions are beyond the scope of this thesis, but must be part of the larger explanation for why the conflicts turned out as they did.

Iraq and Afghanistan Compared

Failure to consider war termination has heightened the risk of selecting myopic strategies that ignore or underestimate the critical strategic risk factors: an insurgency with sustainable local support and external sanctuary, and a host nation government that is unable to win the battle of legitimacy. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, military action resulted in overthrow of an existing regime, but the United States had not thought through the risks to a favorable and durable outcome and the requirements to prevent or mitigate those risks. When those problems materialized, the United States was slow to recognize and unable to address them adequately.

Exclusionary regimes took control in both countries and soon became predatory. Efforts by both Sunni Arab leaders in Iraq and Taliban senior leaders in Afghanistan to negotiate some

¹²³⁷ Dunn (2006); Walt (2011) Hoffman (1996). For a critique of the notion of a strategic culture see Echevarria (2013).

¹²³⁸ For a discussion of strategic distance in a different context see Porter (2015), 2-9.

form of cessation of hostilities and political inclusion were rebuffed by the United States at the encouragement mainly of Shi'a elites on the one hand and Northern Alliance leaders on the other. Statistically, as Dobbins notes, politically inclusive governments are more apt to be successful when supported by peacekeeping troops than are exclusionary governments supported by a peace-enforcement mission. Although Dobbins' study was published in 2003, the data he used was available in 2001.¹²³⁹

In both cases, the risk factors became quickly entrenched. The United States, however, was slow to recognize the problems and to modify a losing or ineffective approach. The primary reasons had subtle differences in each conflict. Problems such as confirmation bias, bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems were common. In neither case did the United States put someone on the ground in charge of coordinating and managing the full range of American efforts. Both administrations in both conflicts operated in bureaucratic silos. Strategic risks were emerging in the seams and fault-lines between and among these silos in the form of problems such as elite capture of milestones and institutions, predation and corruption, civilian harm, external sanctuary, inadequate governance, and hollow capacity-building. Both the Bush and Obama administrations tried to treat the *complex* task of state-building as *complicated* one that could be reduced to several component parts that could be managed by individual agencies. Political, diplomatic, military, and economic milestones were identified, arrayed along a timeline, and given to a Department to handle. These left the milestones vulnerable to being manipulated and exploited by elites in their intense scrimmages for power. U.S. officials seemed largely oblivious to these problems. In-silo metrics created a misleading narrative of progress. Both administrations simply aggregated the in-silo metrics as evidence of success even as the overall situations were obviously deteriorating. These problems

¹²³⁹ Dobbins, et al (2003).

damaged the credibility of both administrations and public support for the missions. Loss aversion was more prevalent for Bush in Iraq than Obama. Audience costs and risk aversion, however, seemed more salient to Obama's decision-making in Afghanistan than Bush for either conflict.

Bargaining asymmetries undermined prospects for a favorable and durable outcome in both conflicts, but unfolded in different ways. Bush was unable to secure an open-ended or "conditions-based" American military presence in Iraq. He was forced to accept a strict timeline. Defense and State efforts to extend the timeline during the Obama Administration were unsuccessful. Political reconciliation efforts faltered and were probably doomed as U.S. forces drew down, leaving Sunni Arabs increasingly exposed to Maliki's repression. Even the most intensive efforts during the Petraeus-Crocker time could only constrain Maliki's sectarianism, not promote reform. There was no negotiation with an insurgent senior leadership or external sponsor, although discussions between U.S. officials in Baghdad and Iranian Revolutionary Guards Officials may have played a role in bringing about al-Sadr's cease-fire. U.S. military officials did engage with tribal elders allied with or in charge of Sunni Arab resistance forces, and convinced many to join with U.S. forces against AQI. Such agreements also served to protect Sunni Arabs from Iraqi government predation.

The transition from American to Iraqi responsibility for security was badly undermined by the government's continued sectarianism. They proved unable to win the battle of legitimacy among Sunni Arab populations. The first transition effort in 2005-6 ended in near-disaster. General Casey organized his military campaign plan around building Iraqi units and handing over security responsibility to them, but Iraqi Security Force readiness clearly took a back-seat to American military efforts to fight insurgents. The training mission was inadequately resourced and focused. Meanwhile, little to no American efforts seem to be applied toward

good governance and addressing predatory sectarianism – problems that were undermining the legitimacy of the government and promoting resistance among Sunni Arabs. Even after the initial success of the 2007-8 surge in lowering levels of violence dramatically and convincing Sunni Arabs to work with the U.S. military against AQI, the United States failed to make political reconciliation a strategic priority. The Bush administration neglected to secure credible commitments on reconciliation in exchange for agreeing to a timeline. The Obama administration took the path of least resistance toward Maliki while staying focused on the withdrawal timeline.

ISIS was the biggest beneficiary as alienated Sunni Arabs began to resist a new round of predation without the presence of U.S. forces to keep sectarianism in check. Meanwhile, endemic corruption in the Iraqi Security Forces sapped the readiness of the Army and Police in Sunni Arab areas as Maliki sold positions and chose leaders based on personal loyalty and political reliability rather than performance. Their disastrous defeats at the hands of ISIS showed how even the best resourced and managed capacity building efforts can have feet of clay. Obama was forced to deploy American forces back to Iraq to arrest and reverse the ISIS onslaught. Governance and political reconciliation remained back-burner issues for the remainder of the Obama administration. Warning signs of a post-ISIS Sunni Arab insurgency may be materializing.¹²⁴⁰

For Afghanistan, transition was also undermined by severe-patron client problems. The disconnect between the strategic intention of transition and the efforts on the ground were even starker than Iraq. The military command focused largely on defeating the Taliban through kinetic operations, while the ANSF development effort was, in McCaffrey's words, miserably under-resourced. Only a fraction of the required training teams was filled before 2010. The

¹²⁴⁰ Anagnostos (7 February 2017); Anagnostos et al (30 November 2016).

ANSF was desperately short of critical equipment. Nearly six years after the overthrow of the Taliban, the Afghan Army was a paltry 34,000-strong for a country of roughly 30 million people. The formation of a predatory kleptocracy happened beneath the noses of American civilian and military officials. Insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan were largely ignored. The Obama administration corrected many of the problems with the ANSF development effort, but remained unwilling to fully understand or address the problems of predatory corruption and the damage it was doing to the hopes for a successful transition. Some efforts were made by the military command to deal with corruption, but Afghan elites simply maneuvered around them. Instead of holding Pakistan accountable for Taliban sanctuaries, the Obama administration continued to provide the Pakistani military funding and assistance. Obama clung stubbornly to the timeline, even though the so-called crossover point became impossible to reach.

The attempts to explore negotiations with the Taliban also failed. The announcement of withdrawal dates enabled the Taliban to play for time. The insurgency aimed for exploratory talks to improve their international legitimacy, to gain concessions, and to speed American withdrawal, but not to end the conflict. Their leverage, they calculated, would be higher after U.S. forces left. When the United States appeared to them as negotiating in bad faith, the Taliban walked away from talks. Failure to build a coordinated approach on reconciliation amplified Karzai's concerns about American intentions and credibility, which led him to undermine the effort. Karzai also refused American demands for reform. The Obama administration applied conditionality only haphazardly and largely ineffectively. Karzai calculated that the risks of reform to internal stability far outweighed any benefits or penalties from the United States. He also calculated that military presence in Afghanistan was a critical American interest that the United States would not risk. Although his perception of Afghanistan's centrality might have been exaggerated, his assessment that the United States

would not enforce conditions or impose penalties was spot on. He used this leverage to avoid signing the bi-lateral security agreement, which improved his domestic *bona fides*.

As the reconciliation effort met failure after failure, the transition method of war termination was being steadily undermined by the kleptocratic nature of the Afghan government and growing dependency on international advisors, support, and firepower. Positions in the government and security forces often went for sale at exorbitant prices. Leaders tended to be selected based on their willingness to pay the rent for their position to a power-broker in Kabul. Corruption and poor leadership were undermining readiness in the ANSF faster than capacity could be built. By the end of 2014, the military command handed over responsibility for defeating a resilient insurgency to a government and security forces that were deeply corrupt and unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and Taliban-controlled areas. Although the ANSF, to date, have not experienced the same widespread collapses as the ISF, they have steadily lost ground to the insurgency. By 2015 Obama recognized that he had to slow and eventually stop the draw-down lest the Afghan government collapse. The latter has proven unable to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and Taliban-controlled areas.

Failure to include war termination considerations led to myopic strategies in both conflicts that presumed decisive military victory and ignored clearly identified risks that were likely to materialize in the aftermath. As the critical risk factors materialized and put decisive victory out of reach, the United States was slow to modify the strategies in both conflicts due to cognitive obstacles, political and bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems. In neither case was the United States able to address adequately the inability of the host governments to win the battle of legitimacy in contested and insurgent-controlled area or the sustainability of

the insurgencies.¹²⁴¹ When the United States tired of the wars and decided to withdraw, the erosion of leverage undermined efforts to negotiate and transition.

Implications for U.S. foreign policy

This thesis contains important implications for U.S. foreign policy. I will address these by hypothesis – recognizing that most apply to more than one. First, to avoid developing strategies that rely upon implicit belief in decisive victory, the United States should develop an interagency doctrine that governs the strategic level of war, require policy and strategy options in which different elements of national power are the main effort, and include war termination in each of those options. To reduce the grip of cognitive bias, political and bureaucratic frictions, and toxic patron-client problems, the U.S. government should de-centralize management of small wars, develop more effective strategic assessments, and take steps to better align interests and expectations with host-nations. The totality of these measures should reduce the likelihood of the United States needing to negotiate or transition to an ineffective partner while withdrawing and losing leverage. American diplomats should develop a professional body of knowledge about wartime negotiations that can help them avoid rushing to failure and prolonging conflict.

Avoiding the Decisive Victory Trap

¹²⁴¹ Sunni Arab resistance re-emerged quickly after the U.S. withdrawal, with many groups eventually either supporting ISIS or not standing in their way.

Despite periodic efforts to reduce war to scientific certainties, guarantees to “lift the fog of war” have fallen well short in delivery.¹²⁴² Jomini in the 19th century attempted to codify war into immutable rules and principles.¹²⁴³ The beginning of the so-called information age in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries produced heady assurances about how Dominant Battle Space Knowledge and Network Centric Warfare would enable commanders to wage war in a prescient and frictionless environment.¹²⁴⁴ Ideas promising decisive battlefield outcomes at little to no cost in (American) blood were seemingly validated in the early months of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. They likely played a role in creating a degree of irrational exuberance for the war in Iraq.¹²⁴⁵ The Bush administration maintained the uncritical belief that military force could achieve political objectives.¹²⁴⁶ Expectations of durable political outcomes emerging from smart munitions proved elusive.

The United States needs an interagency doctrine to guide policy and strategy development, and to help American political and military leaders understand the differences between waging and fighting war. Noted scholars of strategy such as Lawrence Freedman and Colin S. Gray argue that there is more to strategy than military strategy.¹²⁴⁷ Proper strategy integrates critical elements of national power – political, diplomatic, economic, and military, among others. The United States government, however, lacks an authoritative set of terms and concepts to develop integrated strategies.

¹²⁴² Owens (2001) is titled, “Lifting the Fog of War.”

¹²⁴³ Shy (1986), 143-185.

¹²⁴⁴ Johnson and Libicki (1995); Alberts, Garstka, and Stein (2000).

¹²⁴⁵ Toby Dodge, “Iraq,” in Caplan (2012), 242-246.

¹²⁴⁶ For a critique of the conventional view of early 2001 – 2002 battlefield outcomes in Afghanistan see Biddle, (March-April 2003).

¹²⁴⁷ Freedman (2013), p. 241-2; Gray (2012), p. 22.

America shows a proclivity to think of war primarily as a military activity. The consequences of this view are less apparent in conventional war – for which the American national security establishment is better suited to wage – than for irregular war. The former has clear bureaucratic leads: diplomacy to prevent war or build a coalition to fight it; the clash of military forces to win, lose, or draw; diplomatic actions to negotiate peace; and oftentimes economic and aid efforts to rebuild the damage afterwards. Individual, agency-centric plans can be made for each stage. In irregular warfare, on the other hand, the elements of national power must be applied concurrently rather than sequentially. This means a proper strategy must fully integrate these elements of national power, rather than seeing non-military efforts as supporting cast. Without an interagency doctrine or set of authoritative terms and concepts, officials from different agencies and even within agencies will continue to talk past each other about waging war and how to achieve the most favorable and durable outcome at the least possible cost in blood, treasure, and time.

To be sure, there are immense bureaucratic challenges toward such a doctrine. Diplomats tend to resist doctrine as constraining. The military has a robust array of manuals covering tactical and operational levels of war, but very little that qualifies as doctrine at the strategic level. Its terms and concepts are mostly tactical in nature, which adds confusion to discussions of strategy. The U.S. military's Joint Doctrine, for instance, lacks definitions for terms such as defeat, destroy, and degrade – terms which U.S. presidents have used to describe strategic intentions.¹²⁴⁸ The U.S. Army defines defeat as:

A *tactical* mission task that occurs when an enemy force has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight. The defeated force's commander is unwilling or unable to pursue his adopted course of action, thereby

¹²⁴⁸ For a Department of Defense dictionary of military terms, see JP 1-02 (15 February 2016).

yielding to the friendly commander's will, and can no longer interfere to a significant degree with the actions of friendly forces. Defeat can result from the use of force or the threat of its use.¹²⁴⁹ [emphasis added]

As discussed in the Afghanistan case study, this is the kind of definition that McChrystal used when describing the ISAF mission to the Obama Administration – a term that caused significant confusion among civilian advisors and was seen by some as part of a larger effort to coerce the President into approving a troop surge. Obama elected instead to assign the military the mission to “degrade” the Taliban, which is a term with no doctrinal definition at all. This created unhelpful ambiguity, inhibited the Obama administration's ability to govern military efforts, and enabled the military to justify doing business-as-usual. A set of commonly understood terms is important for clarity of civil-military communications.

Second, the president and national security advisor should demand policy and strategy options that are interagency rather than military only. A persistent problem for the United States in waging war has been inadequate consideration of the political and diplomatic dimensions of national power – which can be more important than the military in creating a favorable and durable outcome. This could stem from a view that the military's task is to determine military objectives that will achieve political outcomes. As Clausewitz noted, “The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort required.”¹²⁵⁰ Too often scholars and military leaders have interpreted this statement to suggest that achieving military objectives will deliver the political object. In

¹²⁴⁹ ADRP 1-02 (7 December 2015), 1-25.

¹²⁵⁰ Clausewitz (1984), 81 (Book I, Chapter 1, para 11).

this spirit Colin S. Gray contended that, “Strategy is, or should be, a purpose-built bridge linking military power to political goals.”¹²⁵¹

That view is too limited for irregular war, which Gray would later recognize.¹²⁵² The U.S. military’s definition of strategy, “A prudent idea or set of ideas for employing the instruments of national power in a synchronized and integrated fashion to achieve theater, national, and/or multinational objectives,” is a step in the right direction.¹²⁵³ The rest of the government has not caught up. When only the military is directed to provide options, these more critical elements are left out because the military has no authorities or professional competencies to integrate them. The result is military-centric options for waging war with non-military efforts as supporting functions. As seen in the Afghanistan case study, a former senior Obama administration official noted with frustration that the military presented options only in terms of troop and associated risk levels. The administration never sought to ask for options in which diplomacy or strengthening of the Afghan state was the main effort with military actions in support. War, as Georges Clemenceau remarked, is too important to be left to the military.¹²⁵⁴ This structural flaw in policy and strategy needs to be addressed.

Third, strategies need to include war termination. Lieutenant General Terry A. Wolff, the Joint Staff’s former plan and policy chief, noted that the United States “has no organized way of thinking about war termination.”¹²⁵⁵ Clausewitz’s advice – do not take the first step before considering the last – should animate the development and evaluation of strategic options. For

¹²⁵¹ Gray (April 2002, p. 13) and (1999, Chapter 1); Betts (Fall 2000), 5-50.

¹²⁵² Gray (2012), 22.

¹²⁵³ JP 1-02, 227.

¹²⁵⁴ Jackson (1946), 228.

¹²⁵⁵ Interview with Lieutenant General Terry A. Wolff.

interventions, the critical factors framework articulated in this thesis [Figure 1] should inform but not constrain decision-making. “You need to decide what outcome is most realistic,” McChrystal reflected, “not just what is most desirable.”¹²⁵⁶ History can help policy-makers avoid the planning fallacy. If the United States aims to rescue a troubled ally or partner, like in South Vietnam, it should have compelling reasons to believe that the intervention can reverse negative trends – and can succeed when interventions under similar conditions for different conflicts have failed. If there is a regime change, as in Afghanistan and Iraq, strategic options should be designed to prevent the negative trends from emerging. The deliberate inclusion of different war termination methods (as outlined in Chapter 2) can help discipline and integrate the policy and strategy development processes. This will also help to ensure better alignment within the U.S. government. In both cases, American commanders and diplomats in the field failed to prioritize efforts critical to transition and instead maintained business-as-usual.

If the critical factors suggest that outright victory is unlikely, the United States is probably better off aiming for a negotiated outcome early, enforcing strict conditionality for issues such as governance, political inclusion, and anti-corruption, or not intervening at all. As each case-study has shown, the United States pays penalties in public support as interventions drag on. Once the United States decides to withdraw the bargaining leverage becomes asymmetric and undermine efforts to negotiate or transition. The insurgency and its supporters might extract concessions in exchange for easing the U.S. withdrawal, but will probably not negotiate an end to the conflict. The host nation will not make painful reforms that risk alienating powerful internal rivals without the clear and on-hand backing of the United States. America’s leverage is likely to be much higher (both on the insurgency and host government) prior to intervention than once it is fully committed. This suggests that diplomatic- and political-centric strategies

¹²⁵⁶ Interview with General Stanley A. McChrystal.

that have an eye on war termination could reduce the probability of quagmires.

Avoiding the Failure to Learn, Modify, and Adapt

The United States has been slow in each case to modify a losing or ineffective strategy. This has been due to factors such as cognitive biases, political and bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems. To reduce the grip of these problems, the U.S. government should decentralize management of small wars, develop more effective strategic assessments, and take steps to better align interests and expectations with the host-nation.

This thesis has illustrated that America's tendency to operate in bureaucratic silos undermines the prospects of success. No entity below the NSC has the authority and responsibility to direct and manage the full range of U.S. government elements of national power deployed to a war zone. This results in operations within bureaucratic silos on the ground and cumbersome micromanagement from Washington. These problems leave the United States highly vulnerable to hypothesis #2 problems. In each conflict addressed in this thesis, the United States attempted to apply reductionist, milestone-centric methods to address the complex challenges of state-building and reform. These challenges are complex because they involve the interaction of competing personalities, parties, and interests.¹²⁵⁷ Those interactions create feedback loops causing actors to adapt. U.S. officials, focusing myopically on the milestones, failed to understand how super-empowered local elites were manipulating them for political advantage. These largely successful efforts damaged the legitimacy of the host governments in the eyes of the losers and those left out. The tendency to operate in bureaucratic silos created gaps that were easily and repeatedly exploited by local elites and fault lines in which efforts in

¹²⁵⁷ For more on complexity, see Waldrop (1992), 11-13.

one silo undermined efforts in one or more of the others. The troubling result was that U.S. efforts often self-synchronized in damaging ways. Critical risks in Iraq and Afghanistan – predatory sectarianism and kleptocracy, bad governance, civilian harm, external support and sanctuary, among others – materialized in these seams and fault-lines. No U.S. official had responsibility or was held accountable for addressing them.

The United States can reduce the salience of these problems in irregular wars by de-centralizing authorities to officials in theater. One way to do so is to replace senior military commands with a strategic headquarters led by presidentially appointed and Senate-confirmed official who is supported by an interagency staff. That echelon of command should have the authority and responsibility to direct and manage all deployed elements of U.S. national power, and be held accountable for success. This organization will also help the U.S. government differentiate between policy (which the NSC should manage) and strategy (which the strategic headquarters could manage).

Such a structure may help the NSC measure a war's direction and progress more effectively. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, bureaucracies graded their own homework – offering reports of progress associated with their efforts.¹²⁵⁸ Individual, in-silo metrics were then put together to explain that the war was on the right track. This mentality resulted in an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of whether the strategy is succeeding. Instead of $1+1+1+1 = 4$, as U.S. officials expected, the complexity problems noted above meant that $1+1+1+1$ resulted in far less.¹²⁵⁹ Relying on in-silo metrics can create further confusion because the intelligence

¹²⁵⁸ For detailed examinations of ways the U.S. can better assess counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts, see Schroden (2009 and September 2013); Schroden, Rosenau, and Warner (February 2016). See also Ellis et al (September 2011); Schmid, Singh (2009).

¹²⁵⁹ The 1s symbolize a unit of progress in four silos: military, political, diplomatic, economic. The analogy reflects the milestone approach, too: Interim government + Constitution + Elections = Legitimate government.

and policy communities tended to assess the direction of the war using very different variables. Whereas the intelligence community tended to assess enemy strength and capabilities (and sometimes host nation governance) as growing problems, the Defense and State departments often used their metrics (numbers of enemy killed, civil servants trained, roads and schools built, etc.) to portray intelligence community assessments as “too negative.” The presentation of very different pictures of progress to a National Security Council of limited bandwidth can strengthen status quo bias.

The critical factors framework offers a way for the intelligence and policy communities to evaluate regularly a consistent set of outcome-related issues to see if trends are moving in the right directions. The process, together with the creation of a strategic headquarters, increases the potential for the NSC to examine the war’s direction more objectively. Better assessments can help the NSC become more agile in modifying or adapting policy, requiring the strategic headquarters to make needed changes in strategy, and holding the American leadership on-the-ground accountable for success.

The United States needs to develop ways to address chronic patron-client problems that result in misaligned interests and poorly coordinated and even counterproductive actions.¹²⁶⁰ I do not recall these issues and their strategic implications being addressed during any interagency deliberations about Afghanistan, and I could find little discussion of such topics regarding Iraq or Vietnam. While individual components of the patron-client problem might have been raised (such as host nation focus on political dramas over winning the war), there was insufficient appreciation of their strategic consequences. The U.S. interagency doctrine proposed above

¹²⁶⁰ As noted in Chapter 2, I am using the term *patron-client* problems to cover many of the aspects of what political scientists call *principal-agent* problems. Patron-client more clearly describes the relationship between the supporting and supported (host-nation) countries. For discussions of principal-agent problems in U.S. relationships with host nations in conflict, see Ladwig (Summer 2016), pp. 99–146; Biddle, Baker & Macdonald (2016)

should address it, as should future intervention strategies.

Patron-client problems are not easy to disentangle, but the United States can take some important steps to limit their downsides. First, the United States should develop a common strategy with the host nation. This was done in none of the cases discussed in this thesis. Second, the strategy should include conditionality on agreed benchmarks and associated incentives and penalties for key political and economic reforms. These incentives could be targeted at both institutional and individual levels. Recent studies have shown that reforms are more likely when compelling penalties are enforced than when the supporting power provides only inducements and encouragement.¹²⁶¹ Making smart choices on conditionality requires much more intensive monitoring of how U.S. resources and capabilities are used by the host nation, and greater political will to apply sanctions. Third, the United States should begin to recognize the pit-falls of a capacity-building approach to developing host nation security forces. Host nation militaries do not exist in a political vacuum. The cases discussed in this thesis show some of the ways host nation politics affect the incentives of security officials. These factors can result in misuse of U.S. resources, shirking, and corrosion of readiness. Developing host nation security forces is a complex problem, and needs to be addressed in the broader political and diplomatic context.

Developing Expertise on Wartime Negotiations

In each of the cases discussed here, the United States tired of the war and signaled a desire to withdraw. This combination created bargaining asymmetries that prevented favorable and durable negotiated outcomes. The steps above can help reduce the risk of quagmires and

¹²⁶¹ Ladwig (Summer 2016), pp. 99–146; McNerney et al (2014); Biddle, Baker & Macdonald (2016).

encourage the United States to place higher priority on political and diplomatic approaches to intractable national security problems. For these to be effective, American diplomats need to be able to draw upon a more robust body of professional knowledge about wartime negotiations and conditionality. As of this writing, U.S. State Department officials tell me that there is no professional curriculum on such matters that American Foreign Service Officers must learn and no office within the department that specializes in the matter.

The lack of an expert body of knowledge may be contributing to ineffective conflict resolution efforts. Chapter 2 examined scholarship that has shown systematic problems with the tendency to seek power-sharing agreements as the primary solution to civil wars and insurgencies. The Afghanistan case study showed the consequences of ineffective coordination, misaligned interests, and information asymmetries as the United States first avoided possible negotiated outcomes and then rushed to failure during reconciliation efforts after 2010. The brief discussion of Vietnam shows how the offer to suspend U.S. military actions in exchange for agreements to talks by the DRV may have prolonged the conflict. Similarly, 2015 and 2016 efforts by the U.S. to arrange cease-fires in Syria in the absence of any political agreements on the part of the combatants have serially failed and may be adding to cynicism about U.S. intentions and credibility.¹²⁶² Efforts to encourage political reform failed miserably in each case. The U.S. State Department should commission studies that create a body of expert knowledge on wartime negotiations and the application of conditionality. These should become part of the professional education programs for American diplomats. The following section offers potential avenues for such scholarship.

¹²⁶² Barnard (9 February 2016); Morello (15 October 2016).

Implications for scholarship

This thesis has examined post-9/11 interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq in detail and provided a brief overview of Vietnam. The most obvious implication for scholarship is the extent to which it is possible to generalize beyond these cases. This thesis has highlighted the limitations of viewing war termination simply as an interval between armed conflict and a peace agreement. By bringing the issue into the realm of strategy where it belongs, a wide array of opportunities open for further research. I will use the three hypotheses to explore the consequences for scholarship in strategy and counterinsurgency; in understanding political, bureaucratic, and host nation frictions; wartime negotiations; and civil-military relations.

Implications for strategy and counterinsurgency

Each of the three hypotheses in this thesis opens avenues to advance scholarship on strategy and counterinsurgency. Regarding hypothesis #1 problems, how prevalent is the presumption of decisive military victory among intervening powers and to what extent does it limit strategic thinking? This was a problem for the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. For Vietnam, the prevailing belief among the Johnson administration was that graduated military pressure would compel the DRV to end its support to the National Liberation Front. The Soviets fell into the decisive victory trap in Afghanistan from 1979-1989, too. Not all interventions turn out poorly, of course. On the positive side of the ledger, the British intervention into Sierra Leone was largely successful. NATO used various coercive measures to bring warring parties in Bosnia to the 1996 Dayton Accords, and then deployed peacekeeping forces afterwards. The threat of NATO military escalation convinced Serbia in 1999 to accede to Kosovo's secession.

The consistent war termination problems for the United States in Vietnam, Iraq, and

Afghanistan raise questions about the extent to which the three hypotheses are uniquely endemic to American strategic culture. Applying the three hypotheses to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan and the French war in Algeria could reveal whether the problem applies beyond the United States. Analyzing the successful British intervention in Sierra Leone using the three hypotheses could illustrate whether the United Kingdom has a better handle on these challenges than the United States. The absence of war termination within U.K. defence and interagency doctrine, as well as the lack of attention to the matter in discussions about Iraq suggest that the lack of thinking about war termination, especially for irregular wars, extends beyond the United States. Super-powers, however, could be less susceptible to pressure on these matters from their allies. In both case studies examined in this thesis, many allied and partner countries were more interested in being perceived by the United States as good allies than in demanding major policy and strategy changes as conditions for their support.

Longitudinal studies produced by RAND offer a wide array of intervention cases to examine for hypotheses #1 problems.¹²⁶³ What the RAND studies have not shown is whether the intervening power protected or advanced its interests despite the host nation government losing. A negotiated outcome in the current Afghanistan war, for instance, will likely require more substantial Afghan government concessions to the Taliban than the reverse. This would result in the war being coded as a government loss. A credible commitment by the Taliban to eliminate al Qaeda and other international terrorist groups from Afghan soil, however, would achieve America's top war aim while still preventing the violent overthrow of the Afghan government. This outcome would be a win for the United States, albeit one that might be considered more bloody and expensive than needed. This raises important research questions about how well intervening powers develop options and make strategic decisions. Have

¹²⁶³Paul et al (2013); Libicki (2008).

intervening powers in other conflicts examined the character of the conflict, made determinations that decisive victory is unlikely, and employed integrated strategies that gave them best possible outcomes at least cost? To use Gideon Rose's phrase, some countries could be more likely than others to "trip across the finish line."

As discussed in the U.S. foreign policy section above, the study of strategy should advance beyond its fixation with the military instrument of power. There is no war without warfare, in Colin S. Gray's formulation, and there is more to strategy than military strategy.¹²⁶⁴ Strategy is more properly examined as the purposeful integration of relevant elements of national power to achieve policy aims. Scholarship on strategy should thus include examination of how actors aimed to bring the war to a favorable and durable conclusion at the least possible cost. Lawrence Freedman argued that strategy is governed by start point rather than end-point, but also described it as "the best word we have for expressing attempts to think about our actions in advance, in light of our goals and capacities."¹²⁶⁵ Strategy must have a discerning eye in both places – on the present and on the end-point. War termination provides a useful framework to examine this balance. This more robust view has the potential to enrich the study of war at the strategic level.

This thesis has natural implications for the study of counterinsurgency and irregular war. The critical factors framework could provide a very useful tool for examining how well intervening powers understood the character of the conflict and chose strategies having the best chance for success. In Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the United States ended up supporting governments of damaged legitimacy against insurgencies that had durable internal and external support. These factors made decisive victory highly unlikely. The problem of adverse selection

¹²⁶⁴ Gray (2012), 22; See also Strachan (2013), 210-234.

¹²⁶⁵ Freedman (2013), ix-x.

is a normal one for intervening powers – properly governed states tend not to have insurgencies. When U.S. administrations wanted to build the capacity of the host nation to take over responsibility for the war, civilian and military officials had difficulty adjusting from a decisive victory mentality and prioritizing issues necessary for a successful transition. Studies on how and why successful counterinsurgents prevented or reversed negative trends in other conflicts will be important to informing a contemporary debate within the United States about the efficacy of counterinsurgency.

Scholarship on counterinsurgency should distinguish more effectively between doctrine and strategy. Counterinsurgency does not necessarily require large-scale interventions. A strategy can place the political or diplomatic or economic instrument as the top priority, with military as a supporting function. A small military footprint, however, does not necessarily mean that other instruments are a higher priority. Foreign internal defense missions or partner-capacity-building missions that rely upon military advisors to help host nations fight an insurgency can suffer from an absence of strategy. Such efforts can damage the external power's credibility if it is viewed as providing weapons and training to predatory governments. Most of the countries that receive the highest levels of U.S. security force assistance fare poorly on the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index and several have populations that view the United States unfavorably.¹²⁶⁶ The causal direction of such un-favorability merits analysis.

Surprisingly little scholarship has attempted to define and differentiate levels of war in counterinsurgency. Most scholarship tends toward the tactical level with heavy emphasis on the military.¹²⁶⁷ Such works discuss the importance of political legitimacy and economic

¹²⁶⁶ Biddle, Baker & Macdonald (2016), p. 8; Bruce Stokes, "Which countries don't like America and which do?" *Pew Research Center*, 15 July 2014.

¹²⁶⁷ See for instance, Nagl (2005); Kilcullen (2010); Galula (2006); Kolenda (2012).

support alongside the need to conduct military operations against insurgents, but rarely examine the dynamic interaction of these factors and how they affect the prospects of success. If the tactical level is relatively easy to circumscribe as local and the strategic level as national, exactly what constitutes the operational level of war? How do counterinsurgents organize campaigns to defeat an insurgency? The U.S. military made some efforts to do this by organizing military efforts in various “belts” around Baghdad and with the intention to focus military forces first in southern Afghanistan and then shift them to eastern Afghanistan – a campaign that ran out of time due to the Obama drawdown.¹²⁶⁸

However, if irregular war requires the proper integration of political, diplomatic economic, and military efforts, then campaigns at subnational levels should do so as well. The geographic shifting of security forces or the transfer of security responsibilities from foreign counterinsurgent to host nation forces seems inadequate conceptually and practically. Similar questions apply to the strategic level of war. Inadequate understanding of these levels of war in counterinsurgency may be leading to excessive attention on tactics by senior leaders who should be setting their sights much higher. A series of tactical successes might not equate to a successful campaign, and a series of successful campaigns might not add up to strategic success. The challenges, once again, are complex rather than complicated. Factors such as governance, institutional integrity, and insurgent sanctuary for instance, might have non-linear effects on strategic outcomes. Successful tactical and operational efforts can have limited and temporary impact if key factors at the strategic level are problematic. Scholarship on these issues can advance our understanding of counterinsurgency and irregular war.

¹²⁶⁸ An important effort to define operational art in counterinsurgency is in Dubik (May 2012). He views the operational art as a series of geographic and functional transitions (transfers to host nation lead).

Hypothesis #2 analyzed factors such as cognitive bias, political and bureaucratic frictions, and patron-client problems in preventing needed changes to strategy. Elizabeth Stanley argues that changes of government are often necessary to bring about decisions to end a war.¹²⁶⁹ How often this applies to modifying a losing or ineffective strategy seems equally if not more important. The Bush administration modified its strategy for Iraq (which was obviously failing) but not for Afghanistan (less perceptibly failing). Changes in administration were needed for major changes in strategy in Afghanistan and Vietnam. Strategic paralysis prolonged all three of those wars and led to penalties in public support. Why are some sitting governments able to modify their strategies while others are not? Do democracies and autocracies differ in strategic decision-making agility, and how do the factors in hypothesis affect them?

Similarly, evaluating the impact of the growth and professionalization of bureaucracies on the ability of western powers to wage war effectively seems long overdue. Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow show how bureaucratic frictions affected decision-making during the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹²⁷⁰ Robert Komer discussed this problem in Vietnam.¹²⁷¹ This thesis has shown that bureaucratic silos in Afghanistan and Iraq created seams and fault lines that damaged the prospects of success and undermined the U.S. government's ability to learn and adapt. Management scholars have discussed the chronic problem of organizational silos in business, which could provide useful frameworks for examining and reducing their impact on the conduct of war. Similarly, military and management literature have discussed problems with micromanagement and over-centralization. The advance of information technology could be

¹²⁶⁹ Stanley (2009b)

¹²⁷⁰ Allison & Zelikow (1999). For a critique of Allison and Zelikow see Bendor & Hammond (1992), 301-322

¹²⁷¹ Komer (1972).

making micromanagement from national capitals more likely. A systemic study of this phenomenon and its implications could illuminate ways to adapt national security structures to 21st century realities.¹²⁷²

The patron-client issues discussed in this thesis can help political scientists build upon principal-agent theory in addressing national security issues. The latter, as noted in Chapter 2, addresses how differences in incentives between principal and agent affect behaviors. Differences in strategy and socio-cultural context between supporting country (patron) and supported country (client) can add complexity that makes alignment more difficult to achieve. Strategies that contain subtle differences in defining the character of the conflict and the nature of the enemy can lead to important frictions and divergence of effort. Host nation elites in both conflicts sought to use American forces and resources to consolidate their grip on power, while the United States wanted to win quickly and leave. The Iraqi government promoted the view that Sunni Arab insurgents loyal to tribal sheiks as one and the same with AQI and Ba'athists. The Afghan government's insistence on defining the Taliban as Pakistan-controlled terrorists who needed to be killed or induced to defect conflicted with the post-2009 U.S. assessment that the Taliban were an insurgent group who could be brought into negotiations. The challenge of differing strategies between patron and client and their effects on the war's outcome should be examined more systematically.¹²⁷³

Likewise, systemic patron-client problems raise questions about the efficacy of the crossover point concept in counterinsurgency. This idea underpinned how the United States tried to limit

¹²⁷² For a recent critique of the growing bureaucracy, cost and complexity of western militaries, see Rasmussen (2015).

¹²⁷³ Ladwig (2016); Biddle et al (2016).

its commitment in each of the cases examined in this thesis.¹²⁷⁴ As this thesis has illustrated, host nation security forces do not exist in a political vacuum. They tend to reflect the nature of the political order. Kleptocratic governments, for instance, are likely to ensure their security forces are participants in self-enrichment. This creates major perverse incentives that can have corrosive effects on readiness. Rather than linear growth in performance, such forces could hit a glass ceiling or even degrade as their size increases. This kind of problem helps to explain why increases in resources do not necessarily result in symmetrical improvements in outcomes. As these problems reach a certain level of toxicity, it is possible that no feasible amount of capacity-building can enable a host nation to reach the crossover point against a sustainable insurgency.

The impacts of socio-cultural and historical context on the development of host nation security forces have been under-appreciated. In Afghanistan, for instance, the U.S. military was mirror-imaging in important ways when designing the Afghan National Army (ANA). The use of western-style tactics, personnel, logistics, and command and control systems often grated against the capabilities and norms of their Afghan counterparts. Western systems, based on well-educated soldiers at the junior enlisted levels and expectations of junior leader initiative and autonomy, were being fitted onto a nascent Afghan force that was largely illiterate and led by people who expected highly centralized control and discouraged initiative and risk-taking. The result has been a high degree of dependency on western forces even after 15 years of capacity-building.¹²⁷⁵ Studies of what kinds of tactical, logistical, and command and control systems work better for developing world militaries could advance our understanding of patron-client problems and ways to address them.

¹²⁷⁴ For Vietnam see FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume IV, Vietnam, Document 380 (31 December 1963), 745-6.

¹²⁷⁵ This problem is noted in Grissom (2013), 276.

An issue related to the patron-client problem is the relatively small influence of America's allies in U.S. decision-making. Why do problematic host nation partners seem to have more influence than longstanding American allies on U.S. wartime decision-making? The Blair government placed significant emphasis on the importance of shaping American policy. Evidence from both Iraq and Afghanistan suggest that their influence at the policy and strategy levels was limited. Despite its misgivings about the legitimacy of the Iraq war and the lack of post-Saddam planning, the United Kingdom never wavered in its support. France, on the other hand, declined to support the Iraq War – a decision that had no influence on the Bush administration.

Wartime Negotiations and Strategic Bargaining

Evaluating the prevalence of hypothesis #3 problems could improve our understanding of strategic behavior and wartime negotiations. An actor faces clear negotiation challenges if its leverage is declining. A key strategic decision therefore involves when to negotiate. Everyone wants to do so at the highest possible leverage, but how well can an actor predict when that point might occur? As the cases discussed here have shown, and as the literature on ripeness argues, unilateral efforts to start a peace process will likely be abortive (unless one side is capitulating). This suggests that diplomatic efforts which are episodic or aimed at early high profile concessions from the other side may be at high risk of failure. The literature examined in Chapter 2 suggests that diplomatic efforts needed to end civil wars and insurgencies could be very different than those designed to end a stalemated conventional war. The former might need subtle, deliberately-paced, and continuous efforts to be successful.

Patron-client challenges may also affect wartime negotiations. In each case examined here, the host nation government discouraged the United States from outreach and talks with the insurgency or pre-insurgency opposition. This could be part of a more systemic pattern for

external interventions that may heighten the risk of quagmire. Examining the extent to which intervening powers in other conflicts seized upon early opportunities to negotiate and the favorability of those outcomes could illuminate whether an external power tends to be better off negotiating early – particularly before significant military intervention. Such study could also determine if a country’s status as a super-power makes it more vulnerable to quagmires because other, more powerful, allies or adversaries lack compelling leverage or enough authority to bring about negotiations. Scholarship on these issues will advance our understanding of strategic bargaining during irregular wars.

Civil-Military Relations in Contemporary War

More broadly, this thesis has implications for the future study of civil-military relations. Samuel Huntington, in *The Soldier and the State*, famously outlined the difference between subjective control of the military (their co-option by civilian rulers which reduces their professionalism) and objective control in which military professionalism can thrive far removed from politics.¹²⁷⁶ In this model, the military enjoys a significant degree of professional autonomy in its unique field of expertise – the art and science of war. This principle of civilian control of the military is virtually unquestioned in the United States and NATO countries. That autonomy, however, is not absolute. Statesmen must demand that military operations be aligned with the political purpose of the war. Eliot Cohen discusses this as part of what he calls the unequal dialogue, showing how successful wartime leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill and David Ben-Gurion challenged and sometimes

¹²⁷⁶ Huntington (1957).

over-rode the generals.¹²⁷⁷

Peter Feaver uses principal-agent theory to challenge Huntington's notion of the military enjoying a privileged level of autonomy.¹²⁷⁸ He argues that the military operates under incentives like any other "agent" based on the levels of monitoring and expectations of punishment for shirking (not fully obeying civilian orders and guidance). In his view, uniformed officials have the right to provide advice in their field of special expertise, but not the right to question or circumvent even foolish orders from civilian leaders.¹²⁷⁹ Feaver even questions the right of senior military officials to resign in protest of foolish orders because of the potential damage to the institutional civil-military relationship. This formulation reduces the role of the military from professionals of special status, expertise, autonomy, and relationship to political leaders to that of technicians who do what they are told, even if doing so can have catastrophic consequences. This method tightens civilian control of the military but removes its moral and ethical dimensions.

These models are incomplete. The cases discussed in this thesis show examples of military leaders interpreting civilian guidance in ways that reinforce their existing views and practices but that may have been at odds with the intentions of the president or secretary of defense. The Huntington model does not address this kind of problem. The Cohen model falls short as well – while he might expect civilian leaders to question more rigorously the military's execution of guidance, an overloaded NSC in the highly-centralized national security structure might not have the bandwidth to recognize subtle deviations. Agency theory might describe this as evidence of shirking. That characterization could be accurate in some instances, but such

¹²⁷⁷ Cohen (2002), 208-224.

¹²⁷⁸ Feaver (2003).

¹²⁷⁹ Feaver (2003), location 3893-3902 of 5012.

behavior could also be a product of cognitive bias by the military or false cognates used by political leaders. How can civilians properly control the military instrument in war when there is no authoritative language and set of concepts that enable them to articulate objectives, develop sound strategies, and govern civil-military integration? In each case presented in this thesis, civil-military miscommunication had important strategic effects.

More profoundly, this study questions the assumption of the military's special and elevated role in war. Each case has illustrated how the military instrument of national power was necessary but not sufficient for success. The cases also showed that the political, diplomatic, military and economic domains operated concurrently rather than sequentially (as is often the norm in conventional war). The conventional wisdom that the military possesses unique professional expertise in war and strategy is likely part of the reason that each president relied on them for options to prosecute it. In each case the options were inadequate because they emphasized only a single instrument of national power. In each case the war turned into a quagmire. These problems suggest the scholarship on civil-military relations should differentiate the military's role in the waging versus the fighting of war. For the former, the military's role might be better viewed as a co-equal partner with other elements of national power, all subordinate to the president. The military's professional expertise is more precisely in warfare, that is, the fighting of war. Refining the military's role may put civil-military relations on a sounder footing, and could improve America's ability to successfully develop and implement strategies that have a reasonable chance to achieve favorable and durable outcomes at acceptable cost.

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Interviews Cited on Condition of Anonymity

Interviewee A: Regional expert and former senior advisor.

Interviewee B: Former senior White House official during Bush administration

Interviewee C: Former senior Pentagon official in the Obama administration.

Interviewee D: Former senior official at Multi-National Forces –Iraq.

Interviewee E: Former Defense official who worked on reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Interviewee F: Former intelligence official and Taliban expert who monitored Afghan reconciliation closely.

Interviewee G: Afghanistan expert and former COMISAF senior advisor.

Interviewee H: Former State department senior advisor.

Interviewee I: Afghanistan expert with close academic ties to Taliban leaders.

Interviewee J: Former State Department senior advisor.

Interviewee K: Former senior White House official in Bush Administration.

Interviewee L: A former senior White House official in Obama Administration.

Interviewee M: A former senior Obama administration official.

Interviewee N: A former senior ISAF official.

Interviewee O: A former senior MNF-I official.

Interviewee P: A former senior ISAF official.

Interviewee Q: A former senior ISAF official.

Interviewee R: A former Afghan government senior advisor.

Interviewee S: A former commander in the Afghan security forces.

Interviewee T: A former senior official responsible for advising the Afghan Ministry of Interior.

Interviewee U: A former senior NATO official in Kabul.

Interviewee V: Former senior NATO official in Kabul.

Interviewee W: Former senior Pentagon official in the Obama administration.

Interviewee X: Former senior Pentagon official in the Obama administration.

Interviewee Y: Former Taliban senior official.

Interviewee Z: Former senior official with the United Nations in Afghanistan.

Interviewee AA: Former senior Afghan official in the Karzai administration.

Interviewee AB: Cabinet-level Afghan official.